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# Changing British Values as a Factor in Anti-Muslim Sentiment

## A study of online comments

*A thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

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## Contents

1. Abstract	2
2. Introduction	3
3. Theoretical Approaches	26
4. Methodology	45
5. The Veil	58
6. Homosexuality	96
7. Polygyny	132
8. Paedophilia	164
9. Conclusion	196
10. References	201

## Abstract

This thesis looks at the perception of Islam and Muslims from non-Muslims in Britain within the context of moral values and changing British society. I will be looking at four issues of moral contention prevalent in anti-Muslim discourses today. These are expressed through online comments posted beneath relevant articles published on three major British online news sites: the *Huffington Post (UK)*, *The Guardian*, and the *Mail Online*. This choice of data intends to avoid the social desirability bias, revealing opinions and sentiments that may not be readily expressed in public or in an interview. The four morally contentious issues examined will be: (1) the wearing of the Muslim face-veil (*niqab* or *burqa*) in a secular, western society; (2) homosexuality and its debated compatibility with Islam/being a Muslim; (3) Polygyny - the questionable permissibility for a Muslim man to have up to four wives in Britain; and (4) the Prophet's marriage to Aisha, which raises charges of paedophilia. In each topic, I will be drawing out the character of these criticisms with support of both previous studies of relevance and from various theoretical frameworks within racism, orientalism, integration threat theory and queer theory. This will hopefully produce a clear representation of the nature of the moral critique in question, elucidating their common themes, characteristics and relevant debates. Where possible, I will also consider how such arguments have shifted or originated over time. This will require looking historically from as far back as the medieval and Victorian era to pre and post-9/11, locating the contentions in their relevant social and historical contexts. This approach hopes to reveal more valuable insights into the criticisms themselves, as well as broader insights into how the Muslim community is vilified.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis aims to establish and explore a framework for understanding relations and tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain with a focus on changing moral/ethical and social values. Most research looking at western perceptions of Islam has tended to concentrate on socio-political dimensions regarding extremism, international relations, racism, and identity (Said 1997, Richardson 2004, Allen 2010, Flood 2012). In largely limiting myself to the particular focus on moral and ethical values, then, this endeavour seeks to focus on an area rarely exclusively covered in the surrounding literature.<sup>1</sup> Given the controversial reputation of the Muslim presence in the western world<sup>2</sup>, studying “Islam in Britain” needs little justification. The relatively unexplored focus on moral values, however, is hopefully justified by the fact that much of the troubling tension – particularly that which makes domestic headline news – comes out of a supposed clash of social and ethical values between Muslims and non-Muslims. By moral and ethical values - which will be used interchangeably, I am referring to normative questions and perspectives regarding how we ought to live: ideas on the good and the bad, the right and the wrong (Singer 1994). Women’s dress, sexuality, gender roles, faith schools/education, free speech, etc. all concern such ethical values. They regard the ‘ideals’ of society and of human behaviour. They also regard perceived moral judgements; that is, certain actions, opinions, or cultural behaviours can be deemed ‘oppressive’, ‘backward’, ‘strange’ or ‘extreme’ according to the ethical perceptions of other non-Muslim communities. As well as being interested in the nature of such criticisms in the modern context, I am also interested in how *changing* ethical values in Britain have shaped perceptions of Islam and Muslims. This specific endeavor is particularly under researched. Even within the study of moral philosophy or ethics, it is discrete moral systems of various thinkers, cultures, and historical contexts that are investigated (Singer 1994), but little

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<sup>1</sup> This work is also distinct from previous studies looking at “Islamophobia” in that I am not so much concerned with the rise of Islamophobia in recent years as a global, political phenomenon, particularly since the events of 9/11. I am more interested in the moral themes of criticism which appear to shift over time. Theoretically, this research is situated closer to moral philosophy and the history of ideas than it is to socio-political discourses on contemporary issues. Hence, the term, ‘Islamophobia’, is one that I try to avoid throughout my thesis. Aside from the plethora of problems and disadvantages related to the term (Richardson 2011), the fact that the term has only been made popular in recent decades undermines the historical through-line of the current endeavour. The general assumption of this thesis is that the prominent discourse on Islam from non-Muslims has always maintained a negative theme of moral inferiority since the earliest medieval writings. It is this historical and philosophical moral trend that concerns my research.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘western world’ refers, geographically, to Europe, America and Australia, wherein Muslims exist as a minority population. For the purposes of this research, we are dealing specifically with *British* perspectives in the modern context, and a history of views which primarily come from England and other European countries.

attention has been paid to how moral values may shift within a given community over time. In the current context of British perceptions of Islam, representations are usually studied or surveyed as a snapshot within a specific period (Daniel 1993, Bennett 1998, Poole 2002, Richardson 2004). Yet historical shifts in perspectives, which lead up to modern impressions are not only important for giving a wider and fuller overview of the issue, but as we shall see, anti-Muslim sentiments are characterised and locatable in evolving social dynamics which are ever-changing.

For the purpose of this investigation, I will be required to draw a crude binary between Muslims and non-Muslims, or, Muslim values and western values. This is problematic for a variety of reasons. In the first instance, it is difficult to objectively define who is a 'Muslim' – far more difficult, at least, than defining who is not. To claim identification with a known belief system and to possess 'correct' convictions regarding that faith is a highly subjective and personal matter, which at best can only be confirmed with unsettling controversy. At the same time, we do know that there are people who claim they are 'Muslim' in Britain, and people would claim they are not<sup>3</sup>, and there appears to be patterns of divide between them for various researchable reasons (Phillips 2004). Therefore, some distinct means of identification between separate communities is observable and more importantly, demonstrated in the data which will be examined. It is not so much that I will be needing to construct this binary, as much as it will already be apparent by the way in which the British media and online commenters, for example, clearly 'other' the Muslim presence in Britain.

Furthermore, given the diversity of views within a 'Muslim' population, it becomes difficult to confirm both what constitutes Muslim values and who has the authority to define them. Even more difficult to define are "Britishness" and British values. Abstract references can be made to freedom, liberty, equality and human rights, but how such values are perceived and practiced are best understood in real-life examples. This thesis will therefore formulate an understanding of British values primarily from the way in which they are inversely implied from the critique against supposed Muslim values. This is to follow Linda Colley's (1992) argument, that the British identity has primarily been defined in conscious opposition to the Other. As Peter Sahlin (1989: 270) has also argued, national, ethnic and communal identity "is contingent and relational: it is defined by the social or territorial boundaries drawn to

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<sup>3</sup> By virtue of self-identifying as a "Christian", "Hindu" or "Sikh" or as having "no religion" (2011 Census UK terminology)

distinguish the collective self and its implicit negation, the other.” So to criticise a community for being ‘uncivilised’ usually assumes the civility of the collective self. However, sometimes the assumption of the self is subject to change, and this is simultaneously reflected in how the other community is criticised. Richardson (2004) has pointed out that central themes in the critique against Muslims have sometimes been contradictory, depending on what era of the western world one studies. A main case being the general perception that Muslims were seen as lustfully extravagant throughout the Victorian period - reflecting the self-praised Christian virtues of virginity and chastity - to Muslims being perceived as sexually repressive today.<sup>4</sup> Such shifts and evolution of moral positioning will be taken into account throughout this investigation.

For modern opinions of Islam from non-Muslims, data from the media is considered particularly befitting since the media can reveal much about the nature of society and about what kind of values it holds (Knott 2013). Moreover, the media plays a large role in the construction of our perceived reality (Baudrillard 1994). It has been argued that the way in which the media reports a given issue is reflective of how society sees it, and that this is particularly true of the media’s representation of Islam and its ability to reinforce public stereotypes (Said 1997, Poole 2002, Richardson 2004). The authenticity of people’s perceptions of Islam might be compromised by a desire to not appear ‘Islamophobic’ or racist, also known as the ‘social desirability bias’ (Bryman 2004). Therefore, there is little guarantee that interview answers or even surveys (Krumpal 2011) from the British public would reflect actual sentiments towards Muslims and Islam. Keeping this point and the significance of the media in mind, modern public perceptions will be sought from online comments posted beneath news media articles, which are usually anonymous. Such a medium is becoming an increasingly relevant source for sociologists to gather views and opinions from the public, particularly due to the supposed freedom which commenters have in expressing what they really feel without consequence. Most of the previous studies looking at the representation of Islam in the media have tended to look at the news articles themselves, and so it will be interesting to reveal the extent to which looking at user comments will reflect or alter the ideological and thematic findings of previous studies. Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez (2016)

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<sup>4</sup> Although this has been more recently upset with continued mainstream news on ISIS’s sexual exploits in the 21st century.

had found, for example, that social media amplifies and is more explicit in expressing negative stereotypes of Muslims compared to other mainstream media.<sup>5</sup>

In this introduction, I will first give a brief overview of the Muslim presence in Britain and consider some of the debates around Muslim integration with reference to the government's emphasis on British values. I will then touch on issues of moral concern regarding Muslims in the UK with focus on the Rushdie Affair, which was one of the first major events to establish the way in which Muslims in Britain are represented in the UK media today. This will be followed by a look at the representation of religion and Islam in the media, which will be important for elucidating the limited and often superficial understanding of Islam in Britain. I will then consider a number of studies which specifically look at the perception of Islam in the British media over the past two decades. Among these studies, I shall locate my own, which will take a slightly different approach in methodology and scope. Finally, I will outline how I will be addressing the chapters that follow.

### Islam in Britain and the Rise of Public Concern

While there has been a notable presence of Muslims in Britain since the 19th century with the arrival of seamen and traders from the Middle East, the most significant growth occurred in the post-war era when immigrants arrived from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. A major purpose of their migration was to work specific labour jobs in industrial cities across the UK, which were made available through Britain's colonial relationship with the Indian subcontinent (Ansari 2004). In the decades following the 1950s, migrants continued to arrive from other majority Muslim nations such as Nigeria, Bosnia, Kosovo, Somalia, Afghanistan and countries throughout the Middle East for economic purposes. In 1920, there were only 20,000 Muslims in Britain, but by 1970, this number had reached 250,000-300,000. The influx of economic migrants began to be curbed, however, after Immigration Acts of 1962 and 1971. Still, by the late 1980s, the British Muslim population had reached 1 million (Field 2010). Islam was confirmed as Britain's second largest religion in the 2011 civil census with over 2.7 million adherents. This amounted to 4.8% of the British population in concentrated regions

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<sup>5</sup> The study focused on twitter, which does not moderate posts.



around the UK, around 68% of whom were of South Asian background and almost half (47%) were born in Britain.<sup>6</sup>

Islam was one of a number of religions that came to Britain from migrant communities of South Asian origin. Along with other non-Christian religions, the Muslim faith received very little public attention prior to the second World War outside the international affairs of the British Empire. A corpus of English Newsbooks from 1653 to 1654, for example, did not particularly concern themselves with Islam. The word *Mohametan* - an historical equivalent to 'Muslim', did not occur in an analysis of these texts at all, and only 17 references to *Turk* appear among near a million words of data (Baker et al 2013). It was only in the years after the war that a more socio-politically active sense of Islam started to grow in the UK (Vertovec 2002). This was particularly emphasised with the Iranian Revolution in 1979, although along with the Iranian hostage crisis in the same year, this was more pertinent to US rather than UK perceptions of Islam and Muslims. In the UK, it was the Bradford book burnings following the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (1988) which greatly heightened the negative perception of Muslims domestically. Moreover, the Gulf War (1990-91) also played a part in directing negative attention towards Muslims (Davie 1994), as the media questioned Muslim loyalty to Britain in their support of Saddam Hussein (Poole 2002). Clive D. Field's (2007) research on surveys about Muslims shows that prior to the late 1980s, Muslims were not explicitly featured in national surveys, but were rather incorporated into the ethnic category of 'Asians'. Thus, their social presence was not primarily framed around their religious identity.<sup>7</sup> Only 15 surveys on 'Muslims' were carried out in the 12 years from 1988-2000, 7 of which occurred in 1990 in the aftermath of the book burnings. Still, anti-Muslim sentiments grew enough throughout the 80s and early/mid 90s leading to the publication of the Runnymede Trust report on 'Islamophobia' in 1997, which addressed, analysed, and offered remedies to the growing anti-Muslim sentiment in Britain. The number of surveys regarding Muslims increased tenfold in the next decade to 154 from 2001-2010, showing the dramatic rise in relevance that Muslims and Islam had in British society, particularly after 9/11. This

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<sup>6</sup> British Muslims in Numbers: A Demographic, Socio-economic & Health profile of Muslims in Britain drawing on the 2011 Census (2015)

[https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport\\_2015.pdf](https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Exceptions to this were debates and discussions around Abdullah Quilliam's mosque, established in 1889 in Liverpool. Here, Muslims were discussed in the frame of religious identity, though these were rare in 19th Century news reports. Most 'Muslim' (*Mussulman*, *Mohametan*) references were a matter of foreign policy, often concerning the Empire (Baker et al 2013).

heightened concern about Islam in the UK - and its reflection in the media - has continued consistently till today.

### Social Integration

There have been many debates around the general question of European and Muslim integration with some arguing that the value systems of Europe and that of Islam are essentially incompatible (Poole 2002, Richardson 2004). Here, Islam is typically seen by proponents on the right, and increasingly, the central left, as a threat to national cohesion and native values. Others argue that Muslim integration into Europe is possible under the condition that Muslims adhere to certain civic values which are foundational to the European democratic society. This would be complemented by a degree (depending on the country) of tolerance and inclusion for the presence and needs of Muslim communities. Some writers are hesitant to use the term 'integration' due to the diverse associated meaning and models that can be ascribed to it. The same can be said for 'multiculturalism' and its various forms (Hartmann & Gerteis 2005). Triandafyllidou (2010), for example, purposely avoids the use of the term 'integration' in order to set up her own way of analysing Muslims in European countries. She sees that 'integration' is understood in different ways, sometimes as a two-way process involving both 'hosting' majorities and migrant or native minorities; and at other times, as assimilation: "a one-way process by which minorities must adapt to and eventually adopt the predominant culture and traditions" (Triandafyllidou 2010: 5). Others have criticised the way in which integration has changed in meaning from equal opportunity in an atmosphere of tolerance, to stricter assimilation, particularly for Muslims, in the aftermath of 9/11 (Kundnani 2007).

European states might all in a sense be secular but they differ concerning the extent to which religious freedom and expression is tolerated in their institutions. Triandafyllidou (2010) proposes a conceptual-theoretical continuum along which various European stances on cultural diversity can be placed. The entire continuum is founded on an understanding of liberalism and secularism, as it is from these modern philosophies that a position with respect to Muslim minorities is primarily derived. On one end of the continuum there is "a thin conception of tolerance", and at the other end, "a notion of full-fledged political

multiculturalism" (Triandafyllidou 2010: 7).<sup>8</sup> Towards the end of multiculturalism, for example, is Britain, where the construction of religious houses of worship of all major faiths is permitted; so too is the wearing of religious clothing and symbols in public such as the Christian cross, the Muslim headscarf and the Sikh turban. People from religious minorities are accommodated in petitioning as a collective for the building of religious temples and houses, for dietary needs in schools and at work, and are able to receive partial state funding for religious schools (Triandafyllidou 2010). In contrast, France places more emphasis on the separation between the public and religious realm, meaning the individual is able to freely practice their religion in private, however, religious symbols should not be brought into the public sphere such as in state schools. An implicit principle, here, is that people have the freedom *not* to have religion imposed upon them in public institutions, even in their aesthetic manifestations (Fekete 2004, Triandafyllidou 2010). It is a criminal offense for a woman to wear the face-veil in France, and prayers in the streets are also banned.<sup>9</sup> Despite Britain's relative success in demonstrating tolerance and multiculturalism in comparison to European countries like France, there is still a constant problematization of the cultural diversity issue (Bowen 2012, Rojek 2007).

Tolerance is classically seen as a core British value and as a necessary foundation for social cohesion amongst ethnic minorities. However, tolerance in Britain has long been under scrutiny for its passivity and inherent bias. Editor of *Religious Tolerance in Early Modern England: Historical and Contemporary Reflections* (2014), Elaine Glaser, has argued that "tolerance is a profoundly problematic concept. It is grudging rather than generous and carries an implicit disapproval of that which is to be tolerated. It also serves as a patronising reminder to minorities of who has the power to be tolerant."<sup>10</sup> The subject of European toleration was significant in the 16th and 17th centuries in the context of the Protestant Reformation and the wars of religion. Writers of the time challenged the notion of religious persecution, encouraging the principle of tolerance instead. In his *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, John Locke (1689) had said that toleration was "the chief characteristic mark of

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<sup>8</sup> It is also important to note that countries are by no means monolithic blocks holding single stances on integration. Left and right leaning perspectives within a country will also affect where attitudes lie and will often be very different.

<sup>9</sup> "Paris ban on Muslim street prayers comes into effect" *BBC News*, Sep 16 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-14945467> As of August 2016, burkinis have also been banned in a number of French towns for social and security reasons: "French PM supports local bans on burkinis" *The Guardian*, Aug 18 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/aug/17/french-pm-supports-local-bans-burkinis>

<sup>10</sup> Glaser (2014) "Tolerance and Intolerance" *History Today*, Vol. 64 Issue 2, Feb 2 2014 <http://www.historytoday.com/eliane-glaser/tolerance-and-intolerance>

the true Church" (p.23) and said, for example, that it would be shameful for the Arminians and Calvinists of Constantinople to be in conflict while the Turks stand by and laugh at the inhumanity of Christians to one another. Locke encouraged believers to see a plurality of orthodoxy within Churches for the sake of social cohesion, and said that only God should judge the validity of other Christian denominations, not the Pope, Anglican hegemony, nor the violence of man. Writing with England primarily in mind, Locke's ideas were met with much resistance by the Anglican establishment, and were perceived as paving the way for social chaos and anarchy (Tully 1983). With later liberal persuasions of the likes of John Stuart Mill, tolerance would eventually triumph, however, as an unequivocally positive virtue by the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Glaser 2014). This continues today with British politicians typically highlighting tolerance as one of Britain's greatest and most essential values.

A big challenge for the British government has been the reconciliation of nationalism with multiculturalism (Rojek 2007). Tolerance, along with free speech, fairness, responsibility, and respect for the law, make up the core of the most oft-recited traditional British values in the contemporary period. They are increasingly invoked by political figures and policy-makers in the struggle with diversity, and are oriented towards a call for assimilation when the 'enemy within' rhetoric intensifies. This fits the paradigm of Colley's (1992) argument insofar as the prominence of the Other accentuates the identity of the collective self. Kundnani (2007) points out a social fallacy in this establishment rhetoric, which is that British politicians - along with the media narrative that follows - assume that there is a mechanically direct relationship between diversity and social disharmony. 'Extremism' and 'radicalisation' are often seen as resulting from an individual's failure to integrate, despite personal lives of such individuals often suggesting otherwise.<sup>11</sup> Still, the UK government's answer has been an increased emphasis on core British values to be taught in schools, on citizenship tests, and on critiquing discrete communities and supposed 'segregatory symbols' such as the face-veil. These attacks on multiculturalism and Islam are seen as a psychologically useful way of negotiating one's own sense of heritage (Bowen 2012).

There have been both conceptual and practical criticisms against the strategy of using traditional British values to overcome the tensions associated with multiculturalism. In his *Brit-myth: Who do the British think they are?* (2007), Chris Rojek argues that not only are these

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<sup>11</sup> For example, friends described 7/7 bomber leader as 'Anglicised'. Another attempted bomber in Tel Aviv was educated in a private school in Derbyshire (Kundnani 2007).

traditional values "slippery abstractions" but they are no longer recognised as distinctively 'British'. Rather, they are universally adopted and considered sacred by all western nation states. Kundnani adds that many of these values are contentious in their own right, such as tolerance and free speech, and thus, the conflict regarding the nature of such values and battles over the degree of their application in society existed long before multiculturalism. Kundnani goes on to argue that there should not necessarily be one national story in a democracy, but that universal values such as freedom and fairness are better talked about with the inclusion of diverse cultures, rather than championing one interpretation and labelling the others as 'backward' (Kundnani 2007).

Negativity directed towards Muslims, their beliefs, and values has also been said to act as a barrier to integration, since such attitudes contribute to the relatively weakened economic and social status of Muslims. For Tahir Abbas (2007: 294), "[r]ather than seeking to empower individuals and groups who seek to integrate successfully into a racially, culturally and religiously tolerant society, the view from government tends to focus on anti-terrorism. It does so at the expense of civil liberties, in particular to British Muslims who remain trapped in poor localities facing direct and indirect cultural and religious racism." A better solution for Abbas lies not in imploring minority groups to integrate better through an emphasis on British values, but rather to work harder to ensure the confidence of minority groups by tackling equality issues and discrimination (Abbas 2007). Omar Khan (2007) has similarly argued that migrant communities might not overtly wish to ex-communicate themselves from wider society, but they might work in certain industries, building networks amongst themselves, and live amongst each other for a greater sense of security. The implication is that they often avoid participation in the institutions of power due to fear of discrimination. Thus multiculturalism does not necessarily cause segregation, rather, many Muslims may feel that the wider society is less than welcoming of their presence. This feeling is particularly exacerbated by the media's negative mass-portrayal of Islam and Muslims, to be addressed below.

### Values as a Marker of Difference

As the discourse regarding minorities shifted from primarily being about "race" and "ethnicity" throughout the latter 20th century, to "religion" in the present climate, Islam and

Muslims have become sensationally topical. The shift towards religion as a point of social incongruity in the UK places more emphasis on the espoused values of such groups. Racism of the late 20th century was primarily triggered by skin colour meaning cultural norms and beliefs of such minority groups were less critical to racial attacks, yet such cultural markers became increasingly more prominent in racial discourse overtime (van Dijk 1991). Meer and Modood (2011) argue that racism has always had a cultural element to it. This is demonstrated explicitly through anti-semitism, which Modood has argued is a combination of cultural racism with biological formations (Modood 2005). Similarly, Meer and Modood argue that in post-war Britain, the more whites interacted with non-whites, the more likely they were to differentiate between themselves and the 'other' in terms of customs, upbringing, and forms of socialisation, as opposed to skin colour alone (Meer and Modood 2011). Today, discrimination on the basis of religious identity provides more rational ammunition for prejudiced attitudes towards minority groups insofar as antagonists and criticisers can point to "inhumane" or "immoral" beliefs, practices and values that such groups hold.<sup>12</sup>

The Rushdie Affair was one of the clearest and earliest examples in which Muslims and their values were heavily demonised in Britain, particularly through the platform of the media. Two chapters in Salman Rushdie's, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), address a "Prophet Mahound", who founds a monotheistic religion in a city of "*Jahilia*"<sup>13</sup> on the basis of divine revelation. The book portrays the Prophet as an impostor, making deals with the archangel and treating the religion as a kind of business. Rushdie had calculatedly used offensive and obscene language to refer to the Prophet, for example, claiming he had "God's permission to fuck as many women as he pleases". Bilal was also referred to with two other companions as being part of a "trinity of scum" and as a "black monster", and the names of the Prophet's wives were attributed to whores working in a brothel.<sup>14</sup>

Muslim protesters of the book were not so much reacting to the critical discussion of Islam, which, by this time was nothing new. They were instead particularly opposed to the book's treatment of the character of the Prophet Muhammad, his wives and his companions. The British press gave little attention to the controversial passages and generally neglected interviewing Muslims to articulate their grievances. Muslims were instead marked as being

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<sup>12</sup> The defence: "Islam is not a race" is now commonly used to justify attitudes which would have traditionally been identified as racist.

<sup>13</sup> Meaning 'ignorance'. The same term used by the Prophet of Islam to describe the condition of Mecca before his mission.

<sup>14</sup> Rushdie (1988), quotes on pages 101 and 386

intolerant and uncultured leading to the bigger question of whether or not Britain should tolerate the intolerant (Parekh 1990). After the failure of picketing protests and pleas to Rushdie's publishers, the Bradford burning of Rushdie's book took place on 14 January 1989 drawing the attention of the national media. The Muslims were instantly labelled as "barbarians", "uncivilised", "fanatics", and were even compared to the Nazis. All the while, Rushdie was made out to stand for all that was good in British liberal society: freedom, creativity, intellect and rationalism (Poole 2002). The violent and radical perception was then doubly confirmed by Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* calling for the death penalty for Rushdie soon after. Pictures of the book burnings in Bradford and Khomeini's *fatwa* complemented one another to represent the barbarism of Islam both in the UK and internationally.

For race theorist Van Dijk (1991), the coverage of the Rushdie Affair in the British press was clearly framed from the perspective of the dominant elite group. Otherwise balanced liberal voices from both *The Independent* and *The Guardian* were quick to frame the Muslims as needing to learn British tolerance. The British media's reaction had quickly escalated from a condemnation of the actions of Bradford Muslims, to a condemnation of British Muslims generally, and then to an overall frustration with Muslims and ultimately Islam itself (Parekh 1990). Writers and thinkers in defence of Rushdie championed an absolutist idea of "freedom of expression" on one side against what was perceived as the closed-minded, irrational values of Islam and Muslims on the other. Poole (2002) notes that in *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, Rushdie was made out to be 'oppressed' and was attributed with a number of positive attributes such as 'courageous', 'brave', 'a saviour' and 'generous'. Conversely, Muslims were constructed and referred to as inferior, immoral, rigid, restrictive, intolerant, misogynist, fanatical, manipulative, brutal and threatening (Poole 2002: 138-9). These, of course, were not new terms being ascribed to Muslims, rather they were a continuation of an othering-dynamic established by previous orientalist discourses (Said 1978, Elgamri 2008). Islam's notorious public profile heightened internationally through the Rushdie Affair. Issues of civic engagement, blasphemy laws, multicultural philosophy, and the nature and orientation of certain religio-cultural norms and values rose as some of the most prominent issues of the time (Abbas 2007). From the Rushdie affair also came a previously unprecedented focus on the notion of radical Islam and on Muslim's anti-western sentiments in the UK.

Since the Rushdie Affair, there have been endless numbers of news reports alone which highlight some kind of disparity between the cultural norms of westerners and those of

Muslim minorities. In Europe, such news items are a daily occurrence, as each country deals with its own particular grievances. John R. Bowen (2012) has observed that various focal points are used by European countries to emphasise the moral tensions between Muslim minorities and the non-Muslim majorities: “in the Netherlands, it often crystallizes around the Dutch tolerance for gay men verses Islamic intolerance of same; in Norway, around cases of forced marriage; in France, Belgium, and most recently Italy, around the oppression of women symbolized by a few hundred niqabs or burqas” (Bowen 2012: 56). Britain also emphasises social tensions on the subject of the face-veil, particularly in context of being worn in public and in professional institutions. Within the last few years, Britain also saw the rise of another moral/social panic regarding Muslims, on the topic of halal meat. The “anti-halal hysteria” was initiated by right wing groups such as the British National Party and the English Defence League, who, for a number of years have campaigned against halal meat. Tabloid papers such as the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* then took their turns in sensationalising the issue, emphasising animal cruelty under the Islamic ritual of slaughter and accusing major food outlets of scandalously “creeping” halal meat into their menus without customers knowing. Social commentators and academics had responded to the social panic claiming it had less to do with animal rights, and more to do with Islamophobia.<sup>15</sup> Other examples of morally contentious practices and beliefs of Muslims as represented by the British media will be the primary focus of this investigation.

### Layers of Perceiving Islam

When looking at specific examples of values between Muslims and non-Muslims, it is important to understand that there are different layers or depths in which a particular issue can be discussed. When the media discusses religion, and Islam in particular, it usually does so with an inclination towards cultural wars and politics, but does not tend to address the philosophical, sociological or spiritual themes in which these may be rooted. Of course, the separation of religion and state limits the scope for deeper religious and spiritual themes to be discussed in the public sphere. Therefore, the very medium of the media itself almost necessitates a superficial rendition of certain issues, not allowing for a fuller understanding of more internal themes and underpinning values. Very rarely do we find an article that goes into the deeper meanings behind why Muslims adhere to their religious beliefs and practices

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<sup>15</sup> “Halal Hysteria: it’s About Muslims, NOT Animal Welfare” by Chris Allen, *Huffington Post*, July 11 2014  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-chris-allen/halal-meat-hysteria\\_b\\_5306911.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/dr-chris-allen/halal-meat-hysteria_b_5306911.html)



outside the occasional conversion story, but even these tend to be in sound-bite form.

Timothy Winter captures this point well in an article published on *Gulf News* with reference to the media in particular:

"I have never actually seen an article in a Western newspaper that covers the core aspects of the Islamic religion that are of significance to Muslims themselves. The focus is exclusively on social, economic and political dimensions of the religion. I have done interviews with journalists who say they don't want to talk about the religious dimensions of Islam."<sup>16</sup>

Numerous other factors contribute to this representation of Islam in the media, particularly that which is published online and in print. The first is to do with the limited scope of the media. Newspaper articles and news slots have space and time restrictions preventing information from being elaborated on with multi-layered explanations. Moreover, news reports are usually catered to the lowest common denominator, further necessitating a simplification of ideas and a shunning of deeper discussion which may challenge conventional opinions (Herman and McChesney 2001). There is, of course, a distinction to be made between tabloid and broadsheet papers; the latter tending to consider news stories with more depth and detail for a more professional and middle class audience (Baker et al 2013). However, studies have continued to show that even broadsheet papers are limited and negative in their framing of Islam and Muslims (Poole 2002, Richardson 2004, Elgamri 2008). Second, the media is a medium that often relies on imagery, which only captures the most superficial aspects of a story, shifting the attention of the reader away from underlying factors. A picture of angry, protesting Muslims with scowling faces captured in mid-scream sends a powerfully repugnant message about a people, regardless of their cause. Third, economic rivalry between media companies means that editors and journalists are increasingly opting for more sensational journalism with a preference to shock and entertain, rather than to encourage reflection and sincere understanding. The commercial imperative in general has increasingly meant that media bodies are tending to view people as consumers rather than as citizens to be informed (Herman and McChesney 2001).

This superficial focus on Islam is significantly relevant to the academic treatment of 'Islamophobia', not only because many relevant academic studies use media archives as a primary source, but also because attitudes gathered from samples of empirical data often

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<sup>16</sup> "Cultural investment is the way forward", *Gulf News*, Oct 14 2010 <http://gulfnews.com/culture/people/cultural-investment-is-the-way-forward-1.696524>

reflect the views of the media. Therefore, much of the discussion is, in a sense, skewed towards superficial readings, which is perhaps most inappropriate when addressing a religion so essentially bound up with deeper religious and spiritual themes. Where relevant, I will be introducing each chapter with background literature to give a fuller context to the morally contentious issue to be discussed.

### Changing Perceptions of Religion and Islam in the British Media

The general representation of religion in the media has undergone a number of changes over the last two to three decades. Such changes are important since they provide insights into how social interests and perspectives change over time. While we are primarily focused on media representations of Islam, a few mentions of the changing perception of religion in general are worth noting. In a longitudinal study led by Kim Knott (2013), religious themes and references were analysed in a number of newspaper and television sources in 1982/3, and again in 2008/9. For the sake of consistency, the same media sources were used in both time periods, which included, *The Sun*, *The Times*, BBC1, BBC2 and ITV. It was assumed that due to the general impression in the 80s that religion was on the decline and secularism was being championed, religious references would not be common. However, the early study showed that religious references, both literal and metaphorical, were still quite commonly found (Knott 1984). References included Papal visits, coverage of Islamic Banking, and discussion of religious education. The newer study revealed certain themes that were nowhere near as prominent 26 years earlier; for example, the global reporting on religion in the contexts of extremism and terrorism, as well as the identification of religion in relation to discourses of human rights, freedom of speech, and freedom from religious hatred. The manner in which religion is discussed has also changed. In the 1980's sample, one would seldom see any programmes dedicated to a religious theme or debate (especially outside Christianity), and religion would rarely make headline news. It was assumed that religious references would have increased due to the rise of globalisation, multiculturalism and extremism, but Knott's study found that, all things being equal, religious references did not increase significantly since the 80s.

As can be expected from a more globalised and multicultural society in the 21st century, there was a rise in references to non-Christian religions in the analysed British media from 6% in

1982/3 to 15% in 2008/9. References to atheism and secularism also expectedly increased. The bulk of religious references were still overwhelmingly Christian-inclined in both periods and actually heavier towards Catholicism than Protestantism. The biggest increase in referencing a non-Christian religion was in regard to Islam, where news was mainly framed negatively around extremism, terrorism, violence, and cultural differences (Knott et al 2013). Religious programming on TV was generally found to have diminished, with a reduction of shows on worship and hymn singing. Yet the BBC, who have their own Religion and Ethics division, tend to do more than other channels to maintain such religious broadcasting. What is clear, then, is that Islam is unique among religions in the UK to have suddenly gained concentrated focus in the 21st century. However, there have also been changes in news content relating to Islam and Muslims.

Prior to 9/11 and the steep rise of politically militant Islam in the media, references to the Muslim faith were often related to the alleged threat to Britain's cultural values. When carrying out her study of representations of Islam in tabloid and broadsheet newspapers in the 90s, Elizabeth Poole (2002) had frequently noted that Muslim values were often contrasted with and seen as a threat to Christian values in particular. This differs from articles two decades later where this religious comparison is far less emphasised in most mainstream papers (although it may continue in user comments). Rather, Muslim values are almost always contrasted with secular and liberal values of enlightenment, which, incidentally, was also seen in the 90s. In addition, some Christian values are now often joined with Islam in being negatively portrayed as being backward and out of sync with modern liberal values on topics such as homosexuality (Poole 2002). This correlates with the surveyed sentiments of religious individuals from all faiths, 69.1% of whom agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "My religion is negatively portrayed in the media" (Yip et al 2011).

Baker et al's (2013) corpus study of British papers from 1998 to 2009 shows that media interest in Islam had dipped to its lowest point in 2000 just before 9/11, immediately after which it rose to an all-time high. The next large peak of interest was in 2005 after the 7/7 bombings, followed by the veil debate, among other issues in 2006. Over the 12 years examined, there was shown to be a gradual rise of interest in Islam and Muslims with references primarily relating to conflict issues such as terror attacks, wars, and whether

Muslim women should wear the veil. Moreover, there was a gradual increase in stories relating to Muslims in the UK, as opposed to Muslims abroad (Baker et al 2013).

A common theme for journalists throughout the years under study has been the angry, offended Muslim. This often concerns products of consumption within arts and culture such as literary pieces, cartoons, films, and even computer games. Knott et al (2013) had found that issues at which Muslims take offence are often reported as being trivial, and the Muslim reaction being irrational and overly hysterical/aggressive. This was the case, for example, when Sony released a playstation game with background music containing Qur'anic samples in 2008, and was later forced to recall millions of copies from the market. Another case is the Danish cartoon protests in 2006 as well as the Charlie Hebdo shootings in 2015, and of course, the Rushdie affair in 1989. Consistent throughout the years is Islam being represented in a frame of conflict (Baker et al 2013) and being problematised as stubbornly 'different' (Poole 2002).

### Studies of Islam in the media

*"It is the media that defines the meaning of the Muslim presence in Britain"*

~ Elizabeth Poole

The above quote indicates the centrality that experts believe the media to hold in defining the Muslim presence in Britain. It is not necessarily Islamic/Muslim literature, academic or other, or even interpersonal impressions of Muslims which define Islam for the mass British population, but rather, the consistent exposure of Muslims in printed and online news publications. In the following section I review some of the findings of a number of works entirely dedicated to the representation of Islam in the media, each having their own focuses and methodological approach. Many of the findings among these studies are overlapping, but this importantly highlights the dominance of the anti-Muslim discourse.

#### Edward Said

In *Covering Islam* (1997), Edward Said shows that the discourse of the western establishment, whether media, government or academic, continue a 19th-century Orientalist perspective on Islam. Given this framework, modern journalists, politicians and academics do not need to justify their negative portrayal of Muslims through any fresh objective standard, but can effortlessly call upon the supportive assumptions of previous writers who established the

now conceptually entrenched framework. The title of Said's work intends the pun of referring both to the way in which the western world conducts its news coverage of Islam, while also implying that Islam itself is covered and obscured by this type of reporting. Said focuses more on the US than the UK and more on political issues rather than social ones. He argues that the media tends to grossly simplify Islam so that numerous 'manipulative aims' can be achieved, many of which - he goes on to list - are to do with meeting social/political goals. Said also notes how criticisms of Islam tend to differ according to context, claiming that "discourse on Islam is, if not absolutely vitiated, then certainly colored by the political, economic, and intellectual situation in which it arises" (Said 1997: vii). Thus the US media, after the 1979 Iranian uprisings, presented Muslims as being oil suppliers, terrorists, and blood-thirsty mobs. He also notes that it wouldn't be completely inaccurate to claim that before the sudden OPEC price rise in early 1974, Islam was hardly ever mentioned either in the media, or in culture (Said 1997: 37). Britain has had fewer vested interests regarding oil in the Middle East so the oil caricature had not been emphasized as strongly in the British media.

The "progress" narrative was also seen to be evident in Said's analysis, where Islam is seen as being "shielded from true development by an archaic set of superstitions" and "prevented by its strange priests and scribes from moving out of the Middle Ages into the modern world" (Said 1997: 30). Ultimately, Said argues that Islam is almost always defined as being negatively at odds with the West and such a tension establishes a framework which radically limits the extent to which Islam and the real lived experience of Muslims can be known.

### Elizabeth Poole

In *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*, Poole (2002: 26) argues that "for the majority of non-Muslims, it is through the media that Muslims are known". This is based on an understanding that the greater the cultural distance is between cultures, the more people will rely on the media in understanding Islam. She looks at articles from the late 90s and initially expects that the focus on Britain might be unique in that unlike other western nations, the UK places strong emphasis on integration and therefore would reflect a wider variety of coverage beyond that which is solely based on aggression and violent conflict (Poole 2002: 19). This is later discovered to have been an optimistic expectation.

Like Said (1997), Poole argues that public dependency on the media creates a limited framework, bounding the perception of Muslims within a handful of negative themes

(extremism, political violence, culture clashes etc.), and places restrictions on an audience's understanding of Islam. She rejects the idea that the West is a monolithic culture and also considers how the unique histories of different western nations inform their specific style of anti-Islamic discourse. Still, Poole comes to the conclusion that the overriding Islamophobic discourse in Britain has been largely one of "US foreign policy speak" (Poole 2002: 38).

One of the most common themes of culture clashing found in *The Guardian* and *The Times* in the 90s was personal relationships. This would usually consist of a report on a British person - likely a public figure - having to convert to Islam in order to marry a Muslim. On this issue, Poole notes that "it is suggested that there is some kind of deviant, culturally abominable or criminal action related to the relationship... perpetuating the idea that Muslim law and practice is deviant in its difference from British values and customs" (Poole 2002: 68-69). 'Islamic fundamentalism' was found to be another prominent theme in Poole's study, typically showing Islam as a threat to global security. Furthermore, themes of 'belief and religious rituals' were reported more frequently than any other topic and were usually compared with Christian values and other religious groups, or were framed within a context of questioning the ability of Muslims to adapt to the dominant culture. Cultural issues were often combined with themes of criminality (illegal marriages, fraud and bribery, for example), showing certain cultural practices to be barbaric and the people practicing them to be "polarised in a negative value system" (Poole 2002: 77). Common media references of Islam alongside Christianity also represented a tendency to frame debates comparatively. Poole had found that Islam was often constructed and seen as a threat to not only secularism, but to Christianity and Christian values. Values of freedom of speech, in particular, as reported from the mid 90s, were mostly discussed in conjunction with the Rushdie affair.

A number of "central defining themes" were singled out as showing the meaning of Islam in the British media: i) that Muslims are involved in deviant activities threatening security in the UK; ii) that Muslims are a threat to British 'mainstream' values, creating negative concern; iii) that there are inherent cultural differences between Muslims and the host community, which create tensions in interpersonal relations; and iv) that Muslims are increasingly making their presence felt in the public sphere (Poole 2002: 84).

Poole comes to the wider conclusion that perceptions of the British media regarding Islam do overall reflect those of the global West in general, and that Muslims are predominantly excluded from 'Britishness'. The orientalist discourse is continually transformed to fit the

circumstances of the time to ensure that Muslims are seen as alien, backward, and uncivilised. Poole found that *The Guardian* was most open to contesting widespread views and giving voices to other social groups, however, its exclusive form of liberalism would not always include Muslims because its secular approach marginalises religion to the private realm (Poole 2002: 248). *The Guardian's* liberal approach to human rights also rendered 'Islamic' practices irrational and barbaric.

Finally, in conjunction with her study on the British media, Poole had also carried out research on the opinions of non-Muslim audiences and found that they shared the same interpretive frameworks of the media, expressing a predominantly conservative attitude with regards to Muslims (Poole 2002: 249).

### John E. Richardson

In his book *(Mis)representing Islam* (2004), Richardson gives a systematic analysis of anti-Islamic content in British broadsheet newspapers from October 1997 to January 1998. He looks particularly at *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Financial Times*, *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sunday Times* and *The Independent on Sunday* and analyses the ways in which they reproduce anti-Muslim racism, locating his investigation within a 'critical anti-racist paradigm' (2004: 14). For Richardson, an understanding of orientalist scholarship – both past and present – is key to comprehending contemporary representations of Islam and Muslims across social/political discourse, including mass media and academia.

Richardson uses van Dijk's 'ideological square' as a framework for understanding anti-Muslim sentiments. The 'ideological square' refers to a structural narrative in which the good in the self and the bad in the other are emphasised, while the bad in the self and the good in the other are de-emphasised. This is done through linguistic dimensions of a given text, which utilise words, sentence structures and conceptual assumptions, for example, to achieve the ideological binary between self and other. In this case, the racist paradigm is more based on culture than on skin colour: "Islam and/or Muslims are identified as the 'Other' by virtue of values or characteristics which they are perceived to have" (Richardson 2004: 113).

Richardson shows that in reporting on international issues relating to Muslims, there was a significant preference for stories relating to terrorism, civil war and civilian deaths. He identified four archetypal means of argumentation in representing Islam: military threat,

extremism and terrorism, despotism, and sexism. Like Said (1997), Richardson suggests that there is a continuation, reproduction or even a restoration of racist practices. At the same time, Richardson notes that contemporary secular/atheist criticisms against Islam tend to take different positions to contemporary Christian polemics which still focus on the irrationality of the Qur'an compared to the Bible, and on Jesus' superiority to Muhammad, who is seen as a false Prophet.

Richardson also touches on changing western values in his analysis and notes, for example, that European writers had previously attacked Islam for being overly sensual and sexually permissive. The Muslim religion's more positive attitude to sex – mentioned by the Prophet Muhammad as an act of worship – was seen as encouraging lustful indulgence. Richardson quotes William of Adam, the Bishop of Sultanyah who criticized 'the Muslim sect' for not only allowing sexual acts, but for praising them (Richardson 2004: 14). Such criticisms came from a certain value structure in Christian Europe which upheld the virtues of virginity and marital monogamy. Given the changing nature of western values, Richardson notes that the same point within Islam can be criticized by past Christian polemicists and modern secular/atheist humanists in very different and even contradictory ways. A verse in the Qur'an (2: 223) which permits men to take up various sexual positions with their wives, was seen by early critics as sanctioning unrestrained sexual immorality insofar as it strayed from the 'missionary position'. Modern secular critics – far from wanting to side with any kind of point which might highlight a kind of sexual liberty in Islam – instead, use the verse to emphasise the point that Muslim women are the sexual property of men. Despite the change in the modern critique, the point being highlighted is that Muslim values are almost always represented as being opposed to western values, whether they are classically Christian, or modern, secular and liberal.

### [Elzain Elgamri](#)

Elgamri in *Islam in the British Broadsheets* (2008) investigates coverage in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *The Independent*, analysing how discourse techniques and mechanisms are used to construct a particular representation of Islam. He looks at 4 famous news events including the Rushdie Affair and 9/11 using the work of van Dijk, Foucault, and others, to examine "the systematic practice of meaning-making, which is used in representing a particular topic" (Elgamri 2008: 95). This consists of deconstructing the news articles in such a way as to reveal what (usually hidden) ideologies are supporting their particular style of coverage. The idea is to 'denaturalise' the news content to discover what is truly being said. Elgamri finds



that the overall contemporary picture of Islam as represented by the press reinforces a pre-existing orientalist image of Islam as being “a monolithic entity associated with violence, intolerance and hatred of everything Western” (Elgamri 2008: 214). The discourse analysis of all three papers examined show that news reports used a perceptual framework of violence, extremism, and anti-westernism to build a specific construct, where radical groups, for example, were seen as an archetype of Islam. A ‘threat from within’ theme was also present in all British papers, but most explicit in *The Times*. This was also noted by Poole (2002:10) in her 9/11 analysis where she claimed that *The Times* had focused particularly on “the hunt within the Muslim community.” Elgamri also notes how all three broadsheet papers conflated mainstream Islam with militant Islam, implying that support for extremism and violence is an inherent part of the Muslim faith. *The Guardian*, however, was found to make more of an effort than the other papers to distinguish between extreme and moderate voices of Muslims.

#### [Paul Baker et al](#)

As will be seen in forthcoming chapters, historical perceptions of Islam will be brought forward to show how criticisms of specific issues may have changed over time. Useful to this endeavour are the modern technological advances that have seen an increasing number of texts from previous centuries being uploaded online through initiatives such as the British Library Online Newspaper collections, Google Books, and Early English Books Online (EEBO). In *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes*, Paul Baker et al (2013) have made use of such electronic resources and by searching specific keywords, have been able to analyse patterns of broadcasting amongst hundreds of thousands of papers spanning over long periods of time. In one of their studies, Baker et al carried out research into early perceptions of Islam in British newspapers using EEBO to assess the extent to which common perceptions of Muslims today have been historically consistent. Some of their work on 17th century representations of Muslims showed an ‘othering’ mechanism, whereby ‘*Mohametan*’ would occasionally be coupled with the words ‘*heathen*’ or ‘*infidel*’, in contrast with Christianity. They also particularly focused on the nineteenth century, and found that, like today, Muslims were ‘othered’ and often discussed in relation to issues of conflict. Of course, political and cultural concepts were different, but in instances where Muslims were victims of aggression such as from the Russians, for example, their suffering was downplayed. At the same time, Christian aggression against Muslims was generally excused while Muslim aggression was seen as blameworthy. Although the majority of Muslim references were negative, there were rare exceptions in relation to some Indian Muslims who exerted independence from the Ottoman

Sultan and/or were loyal to the British Empire (Baker et al 2013). These findings indicate, as previous authors had mentioned, that modern media perceptions of Islam have been largely conditioned by the orientalist discourse of previous centuries, also making their way into media perceptions of the early modern and Victorian periods.

The research of Baker et al (2013) into the representation of Islam in the British press between 1998 and 2009 showed that while overall negative, the media is not monolithic in its representation of Islam. They observed a few notable shifts from the earlier end of their sample to the latter. These included moving from a more general ('Islam') to more personalised ('Muslims') reporting, and also an increasing focus on British Muslims than on international issues. Like Richardson (2004), they found that themes of othering and differentiating were common. A gender distinction was also prevalent with women being seen as victims, while men were seen as potential aggressors. There was also inconsistency and ambivalence regarding certain issues such as the face-veil, which, on one side, was strongly seen as oppressive or unreasonable (42% of the time) particularly by tabloid papers, while other more liberal papers often expressed the 'right to wear' and were otherwise reluctant to support the 'burka ban' explicitly. Despite certain nuances in discussion, Baker et al acknowledge that there has been an underlying continuation of seeing Muslims as a problem.

Baker et al's study was unique in its methodological approach in that it electronically assessed key words, their frequency, and the type/frequency of other key words around them. Thus, it was a significant shift from the almost purely qualitative approach of article content analysis of previous studies which had come to similar conclusions. It is hoped that my investigation will provide yet another angle through which to analyse anti-Muslim sentiment; namely, through user comments. The exclusive addressing of specific moral contentions as opposed to socio-political issues, and how these change over time, also distinguishes my research from much of the above.

#### [Aims and scope of current research:](#)

1. To add to the body of literature examining Muslim/non-Muslim relations in contemporary Britain, explaining some of the most recent developments in British public perceptions of Islam and Muslims.

2. To offer an alternative source of data from which to gather public impressions of Islam and Muslims – namely, through the use of user comments beneath news article published online.
3. To understand and explore contemporary arguments which characterise the tension between ‘Islamic’ values and ‘British’ values on a number of moral issues concerning the face-veil, homosexuality, polygyny and paedophilia. Examining these specific moral issues hopes to shed some light onto aspects of media discourses, which seldom receive attention in their own right.
4. To highlight how criticisms against Islam and Muslims have changed over time according to certain social, legal, philosophical and political developments by comparing modern and historical sentiments critiquing the same issues.

### Following Chapters

The next chapter will address a number of theoretical themes which will be needed for setting some of the groundwork for this current study, as well as for guiding and framing its findings. This will be followed by an explanation of my methodological approach, its strengths, and possible limitations. In the core chapters (4-7) that follow, I endeavour to analyse four specific areas of moral contention which appear in the British media in relation to Islam: the face-veil, homosexuality, Muslim polygyny, and the Prophet’s Marriage to Aisha, which brings up the issue of paedophilia. Where relevant, I will be introducing social, legal, philosophical and religious concepts and points which will help uncover the appearance and/or evolution of the criticism. This will incorporate a historical overview of how the criticism has been addressed (if at all) by non-Muslims of the past. Current media representations of the issue in question will also be covered and I will seek to demonstrate how its current media-manifestation has been constructed. The bulk of each chapter will then deal with an analysis of how the criticism manifests itself today through online comments. Sentiments expressed through such users will be organised and divided into themes for analysis, shedding light on the nature of public opinions and giving insights into debates on these matters.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Approaches

Due to the various social issues being addressed in this investigation, I will be invoking a number of theoretical frames and approaches in order to help navigate a hopefully fruitful set of findings. Most theoretical concepts will be relevant to all forthcoming chapters, but some will not. For example, integration theory will be pertinent to all chapters insofar as they all deal with a concern relevant to a minority community within the same society. Queer theory, however, which concerns the construction of sexual identities among other things, will be applicable to chapters 5 and 7 only.

### Critical Discourse Analysis

Previous studies concerning the representation of Islam in the British media have used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the ways in which Muslims and Islam have been portrayed in the media (Poole 2002, Richardson 2004, Elgamri 2008, Baker et al 2013). In contrast to the use of CDA in my investigation, such studies have tended to apply the methodological tool on newspaper articles concerning Islam and Muslims yielding mutually agreeable results: that overall, Islam is negatively represented in the media, usually framed around extremism, violence, sexism, and culture clashing. I find little need, therefore, to apply CDA to more articles about Islam, but will be solely concerned with comments of users posted beneath such articles. A primary interest will be to examine the extent to which sentiments expressed reflect themes of newspaper narratives discovered in previous studies. In addition, I will be considering the extent to which such sentiments have changed over time by comparing general opinions with anti-Muslim sentiments in the past regarding the same issue.

Critical discourse analysis is the research into how social and political content - both in text and speech - are communicated in ways that establish specific power dynamics between social and cultural groups. CDA does not assume a value-free dissemination of knowledge in society, but maintains an explicit awareness that all sciences and scholarly discourse are attached to and influenced by dominant social structures. Thus, in seeking to expose (and resist) social injustices and inequalities that are prominent in mainstream society, critical discourse analysts will usually find themselves aligned and in solidarity with minority and

socially undermined groups. Major areas of interest relevant to this current study include discourses of Islamophobia and racism, both of which will be considered in this section below. Political and social discourses being analysed under CDA may take a variety of forms, from mainstream newspaper articles to history lessons at school, to popular movies (Shaheen 2014). The relation between discourses and society are not always overtly manifest, but often opaque, which, itself, is a means for securing power and hegemony (Fairclough 1993). What unites all kinds of CDA is the “way specific discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance” (van Dijk 2001: 354).

The orientation of power within public discourse is an essential notion within critical discourse analysis and is crucial to this current study. The assumption is that hegemonic structures are maintained by social norms, laws, rules, and values, which manifest consistently in everyday life (van Dijk 2001). There are different levels in which people are engaged with discourses, ranging from active influence to more passive participation. The majority of people may have a degree of negotiating power over their friends, family members and colleagues; whereas journalists, professors, and politicians, for example, have a higher degree of control over the media, scholarship, and public discourse, respectively. Those who have more control, have more power, and thus fall into the focus of critical discourse analysts who seek to expose the abuse of such power. For example, police have the power to stop and search individuals who bear a certain cultural or racial appearance, while editors and publishers have the power to disseminate certain ideas and opinions.

The media is an immediate and obvious resource for critical discourse analysts. Many ‘strategies’ and tools are used within the media to overtly or subtly construct specific systems of representation which uphold certain hegemonic structures, or *mental models*. As van Dijk explains, a model is a representation of an experience or event with a unique contextual interpretation in accordance with specific discourse structures (van Dijk 1995). Models within the media may then influence the mental models of media users as a form of social control by steering social knowledge and attitudes. One of the key functions the media has is to “normalise” certain models. An example of this is making gross stereotypes seem natural, such as the Muslim terrorist, or the Black mugger. Such stereotypical themes in the media are produced repetitively as common sense, thus entrenching these ideas in the wider social narrative of the public. Fergusson (1998) uses the term ‘naturalisation’ to describe this

phenomenon and highlights that the media will gloss over or omit entirely the history of complex interactions which gave rise to such stereotypes to present them as natural for the sake of some social, economic or political objective. In such a way, the media influences personal minds leading to social control and ideological hegemony (van Dijk 1995). For this investigation we will be principally concerned with public reactions to British news articles about Islam and Muslims. This is especially relevant to a sociocognitive approach within CDA which looks at the way in which people's minds are influenced through social structures of power. Opinions, views, and beliefs of people, or, their mental models, may reflect a dominant discourse as conveyed through discourse structures within the media through the reporting of certain events, actions, speeches, or situations. Van Dijk (2015) outlines a number of such discourse structures. These may consist of what topics are talked about and how the issue is framed or argued. An example would include omitting certain parts of news stories to encourage certain slants on an issue, like when, for example, no context for the actions of Muslims are given, leading readers to assume that their faith was a direct cause of their aggression (Knott et al 2013). Implications and presuppositions can also be presented within the media as "facts", despite not necessarily being true, but are accepted as such. Furthermore, claims of influential people, such as major politicians, disseminated through the media are also powerful semantic properties of discourse. For example, Cameron's claim that multiculturalism has "failed", almost pervasively officializes the negative state of multicultural Britain in the minds of many.

Van Dijk explains a fundamental principle in the hegemonic use of ideology, through what he calls the 'ideological square'. This is simply a polarizing framework representing the self as better than the other and can manifest both implicitly and explicitly (van Dijk 1998). The square consists of four points emphasising the good in the self, while de-emphasising the good in the other; and de-emphasising the bad in the self, whilst emphasising the bad in the other. The result is a clear binary between positive "us" and negative "them". This binary affects the way in which news stories are represented across a range of issues such as immigration, employment and education, and also in morally relevant issues to do with minority communities, such as immigrants and Muslims.

## Orientalism and Islamophobia

The commonly reported media narrative of “us and them” regarding Muslims in the UK shares much in common with racist discourse and classic orientalism. Orientalism has been perhaps one of the most important theories for understanding the representation of the “Orient”, or the Islamic Other in the western world. Said’s text, *Orientalism* (1978) was central to the formation of this theory, which he defined as “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views about it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it... for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1978: 3). Said used Michel Foucault’s notion of discourse to help identify orientalism in relation to knowledge and power, and considered it vital to understanding how enormously systematic and pervasively influential the orientalist discourse was. Indeed, orientalist scholarship - knowledge produced about the Islamic Other - has been key to understanding contemporary representations of Islam and Muslims today. Underlying the discourses of orientalism and what is referred to as ‘Islamophobia’ is a global structural context of power, with its own racial/ethnic, gender, religious, linguistic, and epistemic hierarchy. In the modern de-colonial narrative, this has been referred to as the “modern/colonial Westernized Christian-centric capitalistic/patriarchal world system” (Grosfoguel 2012).

A key attribute of orientalist discourse with regards to Muslims has been the essentializing of Islam into a monolithic religion, ignoring its rich diversity and internal scholarly debates. In addition, the Orient is inherently seen as separate, different and inferior to the West, as well as antithetical to notions of progress and enlightenment. This setting up of opposites ensured that Muslim culture and peoples are conceptually seen as primitive or backward, regardless of the actual content of their culture. In his article, *Islamophobia and the Time and Space of the Muslim Other* (2012), Khaldoun Samman examines how the West sees Islam as spatially and temporarily distant from the modern world. The idea is that modern minds have been modelled by a nineteenth century dogma which dictates that all societies and cultures progress through a linear route of progression. Some of these cultures remain stuck in a phase of tradition or agriculture, others are more feudal-like, but the most advanced are those which have undergone a true renaissance and secular reform. Non-western lands are thus seen as existing in a different time zone - one that is perhaps centuries behind. Samman argues that the language and use of terms such as ‘savage’, ‘primitive’, ‘traditional’ ‘developed’ and

'developing' reinforce this time-progressive notion "where one's culture and his capacity to use science, tools and technology was now understood as the defining criteria upon which his advancement could be measured" (Samman 2012: 113). This dynamic between the "rational, energetic, in control, progressive-minded, disciplined, punctual, and efficient" West and the rest of the world, is akin to a parent-child relationship, says Samman, in modern international relations. The child must do as he is told. If not, he can be punished by withdrawing food and aid, or more severely by military invasion and occupation.

Such aspects of Islamophobia and orientalism are part of the ideological foundation, or 'cognitive machine' which generates group attitudes, and sustains their reproduction (van Dijk 1991). They are ultimately cognitive systems with a "goal-directed and interest-related interpretation and representation of social reality" (van Dijk 1991: 37). Both dominating and dominated groups may adopt such ideological narratives; for example, Muslims may presume themselves to be 'behind the West' in terms of social culture and morality (Massad 2007). This only strengthens the hegemonic power of the dominant group, and reduces the potential for resistance. It also demonstrates the advantage of subtly influencing people at the level of ideology instead of traditional coercion, which is far less ethically ambiguous.

### Racism

Racism has much in common with anti-Muslim discourse and, in many ways, can be seen as a precursor to Islamophobia (Saeed 2007). Van Dijk (1991: 20-21) had reviewed works which looked at the press and representations of ethnic minority groups from the 60s to the 80s and discovered that "the Press has indeed been a main 'foe' of black and other minorities... its dominant definition of ethnic affairs has consistently been a negative and stereotypical one: minorities or immigrants are seen as a problem or a threat, and are portrayed preferably in association with crime, violence, conflict, unacceptable cultural differences, or other forms of deviance." These conclusions drawn from works looking at mid-late 20th century press representations of racial minorities, and those of works looking at media representations of Islam today are strikingly similar. Van Dijk goes on to say that from the view of the white man's world, minorities tend to be categorised as "them" as opposed to "us" and as not belonging. Hence, Islamophobia is seen by some thinkers to be a continuation of racism, specifically adapted to the Muslim condition. In *The Multiple Faces of Islamophobia* (2012), Ramon Grosfoguel argues that a type of continuous racism underpins the European view of



the Other, characterised by perceptions of non-whites as being “uncivilized,” “barbarian,” “savage,” “primitive,” and “underdeveloped”. According to Grosfoguel, the European identity against Islam and anything non-European was constructed in 1492 when the Spanish Christian Monarchy expelled the Arab and Jewish population from Spain and forced those that remained to convert to Christianity. As a result, “Jews and Arabs became the non-European subaltern internal ‘Others’ inside Europe” (Grosfoguel 2012: 11). George Fredrickson (2001) cites a slightly earlier example of what is believed to be ‘the first sign of a racist view’ which was the identification of the Jews with the devil and witchcraft in various parts of Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries. In any case, Fredrickson also notes that Spain was first to officially sanction such a view. This European attitude would be standardised in subsequent colonial expansion from Europe into the Americas and other parts of the world. The racial discourse has continued to shift in its character throughout previous centuries, but remains essentially the same today. Grosfoguel defines this modern rendition as ‘epistemic racism’, which clearly parallels Said’s orientalism:

“Epistemic racism as the most invisible form of racism, contributes to legitimate an artillery of experts, advisers, specialists, officials, academics and theologians that keep talking with authority about Islam and Muslim people despite their absolute ignorance of the topic and their Islamophobic prejudices.” (Grosfoguel 2012: 19)

Van Dijk (1991) also notes that classic forms of racial discrimination, or ‘biological racism’, are increasingly being replaced by a socio-cultural form of racism. For Meer and Modood (2011), the concept of race is not exclusively bound with biology or colour to begin with. In Europe, biological and cultural racism are linked in anti-Muslim discourses, seeing as such discourses culturally vilify and demand assimilation towards an alleged ‘civilised’ norm from groups who also happen to suffer biological racism (Meer and Modood 2011). Cultural racism, although more complicated than biological racism, is seen by theorists as no less effective or insidious, especially in societal contexts in which all forms of discrimination are openly rejected. Governments of dominant groups may explicitly reject racist or anti-Muslim parties in the name of tolerance and equality, yet discriminatory processes and practices still occur. Throughout history, van Dijk claims that the practice of racism might change under the influence of particular social, historical and political contexts, however, if basic principles such as the moral ridicule of the other remain the same, the overall racist structure will continue.

Whether historical or modern, then, racism is understood as “a system of group dominance” (van Dijk 1991: 27). The system is both ideological and structural, both aspects being mutually dependent on one another. Structural inequalities in various dimensions of political, cultural and economic life are supported by corresponding prejudiced ideologies; while racism as an idea is systematically developed and maintained by structural inequalities. It is then essential that dominant groups (such as the white group) ‘reproduce their dominance’ economically, socially, culturally and ideologically, through avenues such as education and the media. Van Dijk (1991) explains that since white elites control such structures of power, they will have control over the way in which minorities are represented. The media has a key role, therefore, in sustaining white dominance, as it represents a positive impression of the self in comparison to others:

“More than any other form of public communication and discourse, the media have the ability to contribute the shared elements that define the ethnic situation and that develop or change the ideological framework used by white people to understand and control ethnic events and relations. They provide specially selected ‘facts’ and preformulate preferred meanings and opinions” (van Dijk 1991: 39).

Reproduction occurs by the continuation of social systems such as ‘racism’ and ‘the press’ on the macro-level, as well as the espousing of racist principles or discriminatory rhetoric by writers, journalists and politicians at the micro-level. Criticism of Islam and Muslims is particularly given freer reign to be reproduced due the insistence from (usually right wing) thinkers that Islam is not a race and is therefore, not racism (Meer and Modood 2011). There can be dissenting voices from members and actors of the dominant group who become allies of minority groups by espousing anti-racism, for example. These will usually consist only of a minority proportion of the dominant group since they are generally unharmed by, and can benefit from the prevalent public discourse. Structurally, while the press operates on the macro-level, dissenting voices are on the micro-level and may consist of a specific newspaper, journalist or article. They might adopt another system of discourse, for instance, or disrespect the prevailing norms. But van Dijk also claims that such voices do not debilitate the system and, in fact, may strengthen it. The idea is that such voices of ‘legitimate dissent’ allow room for the system of dominance to be less rigid, but not enough to overturn its overall structure (Herman and Chomsky 2002). This makes the dominant structure less questionable since it appears to champion views such as anti-discrimination, equality and diversity of opinion, while still demonstrably vilifying a minority group. The only way, van Dijk (1991) argues, for

the structure to be replaced, is if such bottom-up modes of dissent become systematic and generalised.

For the purposes of our study, the micro-level of reproduction would extend to user commenters who partake in a socio-cognitive aspect of reproduction, reproducing anti-Muslim sentiment established by the mainstream media. They also provide a public platform for views which challenge the general anti-Muslim discourse. Such comments have been shown to be, at times, at least as influential on readers as the articles themselves (Kareklas et al 2015, Yang 2008). Thus, while comments are generally expected to reflect the narrative of their articles, they also carry the potential to challenge and subvert them.

### Social Construction and Discourse

Social constructionism is basically the idea that something we understand in a certain way, did not necessarily have to be understood in that way. We take certain social constructs for granted and may assume them to be essential truths, but research into different historical conceptions of such phenomenon, or perspectives from different cultures, demonstrate that our understanding is likely shaped by specific social processes. Social norms and ideas are thus constructed realities in the cognition of tempo-spatial-subjected individuals, which may adapt and change over time (Giddens 1991). Major subjects of social construction have included race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and age. Sociologists argue that the meanings attributed to each of these are socially constructed and can vary significantly between times and cultures, or not mean anything at all (Taylor 1997). One of the ways in which we give such ideas their specific meanings is through discourse - that is, the way in which we discuss and talk about such issues. For Foucault, this is usually associated with power: people with authority might define and address an issue in a certain way for their own benefit, or the benefit of certain social groups. A classic example of this is the social construction of racial hierarchy in the nineteenth century, in which human beings were categorized according to their skin colour, hair type, and facial features, classifying some as inferior, leading to the justification of slavery and exploitation of such people. Feminist thinkers also highlight the constructed nature of gender, which carries behavioural assumptions to do with masculinity and femininity, as well as the roles traditionally ascribed to both sexes. Here, arguments of social constructionists seek to break down patriarchal values regarding gender and especially

women, in order to re-conceive the existential trajectory of women separate from male-defined parameters.

Social constructionism and discourse are also heavily relevant to the media, as implied above. Racial privileges, social hierarchies and 'othering' can all be generated and reproduced by narrative choices in the media. Individuals of important status can also make claims which shift and/or consolidate public perceptions and attitudes, creating and cementing characteristics of a discourse. Ultimately, negative attitudes and alleged social problems can be constructed by media discourses to serve social and political ends, despite such attitudes and problems not necessarily having a justified or concrete basis in reality.

### Integration Theory

Integration theory becomes more relevant to this current study than to previous studies looking at Islam in the British media, since user comments offer a more immediate and 'raw' insight into perceptions and attitudes from individuals as a majority group towards Muslims living within the same society.

### Intergroup Contact Theory

The intergroup contact theory or 'contact hypothesis' is originally credited to Gordon Allport (1954) who suggested that direct contact between different social groups can succeed in improving negative relations, particularly by reducing the presence of prejudice. The favourable result would more easily be achieved, according to Allport, if the contact situation involved the following four factors: equal status between groups, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support of institutional authorities. If such factors are not present or contradicted, contact is likely to have the opposite effect and exacerbate social tensions. However, others have highlighted that intergroup contact can still be effective without such conditions (Husnu and Crisp 2010). It has also been shown that the quality of contact between a majority and minority group is more important than the quantity (Croucher et al 2014, Stephan et al 2000). The idea here being that more intimate contact leading to friendship is the key to reducing prejudice (Pettigrew 1998). Since Allport (1954), researchers have also considered other factors which assist in positive relations between groups such as learning more about the outgroup, and rethinking the status of one's ingroup. Once someone's opinion

about another from an outgroup is positively changed, there is also the important question of how to make reformed opinions generally applicable to others in the ingroup (Pettigrew 1998).

Another study by Smith et al (2006) showed that being somewhat familiar with a person or group through 'previous exposure' leads to less analytic processing and thus a greater reliance on stereotypes for understanding. It is possible that this type of familiarity can be offset by increased closer relationships and friendships, but in the absence of such positive intimacy, negative stereotypes are more likely to prevail. This is particularly relevant to the perception of Muslims by non-Muslims after having been previously exposed to negative representations of Muslims and Islam in the media. People's "media-familiarity" of Muslims will be relied upon when coming into contact with Muslims in real life, thus increasing the use of negative stereotypes.

A number of studies have sought to test contact theory within the context of Muslims in Europe and have found results to generally validate Allport's original theory. Savelkoul et al (2011) had found that in the larger cities of the Netherlands where Muslims are more numerous, the majority population are able to become acquainted with the presence of Muslims, leading to less negative attitudes. Novotny and Polonsky (2011) also found that increased contact with Muslims among Czech and Slovak university students - both personally and through travelling to Muslim countries - correlated with lesser prejudice and stereotypical attitudes towards Muslims. To further validate the theory in its inverse implications, Agirdag et al (2012) had found that Belgian teachers working in schools with majority Muslim populations had more negative attitudes towards Muslim students than other teachers in more mixed schools. The example here demonstrates Allport's principle of equal status being contradicted due to the imbalanced teacher/student relationship, hence the negative result. An integration study carried out by Croucher et al (2014) also found opposing results. A survey on the attitudes of Spanish Catholics saw that increased contact with Muslim immigrants led to increased feelings of threat. However, this study was carried out in 2012 while Spain was undergoing an economic crisis. Thus the researchers acknowledge that the counter-finding to Allport's theory may have been due to extra sensitive attitudes towards immigrants given the economic context. The Catholic identity of Spanish participants was also factored in as an explanation, as well as the *quality* of contact, which the researchers concede, was not factored into their more quantity-based measure of contact.

### Integrated Threat Theory

Integrated threat theory is relevant to multicultural or multi-religious societies where a dominant culture believes that their values are threatened by those of a minority, which in turn leads to the development of prejudiced attitudes to that minority group. Prejudice manifests itself as negative sentiments expressed through words and/or actions towards an outgroup (Duckitt 1992). Traditionally, such prejudice has been blatant, however, in recent decades subtle and more indirect forms of prejudice have also prevailed, preserving racism, anti-Muslim sentiment and other forms of discrimination (Pettigrew & Meertens 1995). Threats do not need to be real for prejudice to arise. As Stephan et al (2009: 45) explain, "Intergroup threat theory is a social psychological theory in that it is primarily concerned with perceptions of threat. Perceived threats have real consequences, regardless of whether or not the perceptions of threat are accurate. Thus intergroup threat theory is not as concerned with the actual threat posed by outgroups (e.g., rising rates of unemployment or immigration) as it is the degree to which threats to the ingroup are perceived to exist." Stephan and Stephan (2000) originally outlined four types of threats which play a role in causing prejudice: realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes, however, they have now been reduced to just 2 main types: realistic and symbolic (Stephan et al 2009).

*Realistic threats* are threats coming from the outgroup to the ingroup in the form of warfare or threats to the political or economic status of the ingroup. These are relevant to the material well-being of the ingroup and its members - their power and resources. Political and economic threats are especially significant when resources are limited, for example, linking immigration issues to economic problems (Croucher 2008).

*Symbolic threats* are those involving differences in morals, values, standards, beliefs and attitudes, or general threats to the worldview of the ingroup. For Stephan and Stephan (2000) prejudice is partially caused by a feeling that your values are threatened. The more the ingroup's values are threatened, the more negative the attitude towards the outgroup will be. In order to exert the power of the ingroup culture, then, prejudiced attitudes are directed towards the outgroup to establish the ingroup's cultural dominance. In America, symbolic-threat theories focused on the prejudice against African-Americans who were seen to be threatening the American Protestant work ethic of hard work and discipline (Kinder and Sears 1981). In the context of Britain, Muslims are seen to be threatening a number of general

and specific values from the status of women and respect for the law, to the method by which animals are killed for food. Since I will be principally concerned with issues of moral contention towards Muslims, these symbolic threats will be most immediately relevant to the forthcoming research.

A third type of threat were those of *negative stereotypes*. Stereotypes are linked to threats as a means of exerting power and dominance over the outgroup, but also as a reflection of an actual threat. The understanding is that stereotypes serve as a basis from which to expect behavior of the stereotyped group. Such stereotypes regarding Islam have been well documented in previous works dealing with Muslims in the British media. For example; that Islam is inherently violent, that Muslim women are oppressed, and that Islam's moral values are backward and essentially in conflict with the modern values of the western world (Poole 2002, Richardson 2004, Elgamri 2008, Baker et al 2013). Stephan et al (2009) had later explained that rather than being a threat in and of itself, negative stereotypes are a predictor of both realistic and symbolic threats.

Finally, *intergroup anxiety*, which is now seen as a subtype of threat (Stephan et al 2009), is whereby members of the ingroup fear that their being in contact with the outgroup might cause themselves to be embarrassed, rejected or ridiculed (Stephan and Stephan 2000). It therefore operates on a more personal level to do with apprehensions. As a result, contact with the outgroup is often avoided and a more subtle prejudice is demonstrated. This type of prejudice regards the individual's level of fear (Croucher et al 2014), and is not as directly relevant to the current investigation since it involves hidden anxieties. For example, a caucasian British man may want to express certain opinions, but may feel he will offend Muslims or be labelled Islamophobic or racist. Thus what such a person feels inside is not congruent with what they display in public. The means of extracting data for this research, namely anonymous online commenting, has been specifically chosen to avoid this kind of social bias (Baym 2010).

### Historical and Social Factors Affecting Group Threat

Stephan et al (2009) highlight the history of group conflict and group size as factors influencing intergroup threat. Social groups are more likely to perceive intergroup threats if they believe they have a long history of conflict with another group. Previous studies demonstrate that, domestically, Islam and Muslims have been negatively represented as anti-

western in the media, since at least the late 1970s. But we can extend this conflict further back to the British Empire and negative perceptions of the orient, as well as even further back to the enemy rhetoric of the crusades in the Middle Ages. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and its link to modern anti-Muslim sentiment through theories on racism outlined above demonstrate that the history of group conflict between Europe and Muslims is perceived to be a long and continuous one, exacerbating sentiments of threat.

Group size also plays a factor in perceived threat in both directions. Muslims are a minority in Europe, and thus experience the threat of the more powerful, dominant ingroup. At the same time, while Muslims are a minority to the dominant group, the dominant group is also aware that the Muslim presence in the wider world arena is significantly large, and so too is the rate at which they are expanding in population both domestically and internationally. Thus the threat of Islam is amplified by their wider demographic situation, despite the minority Muslim presence in a given European country.

Cognitive biases are also affected by threat in intergroup perceptions. This is similar to van Dijk's (1998) *ideological square* within critical analytical discourse outlined above, in that negative acts of the outgroup are attributed to their inherent characteristics, while negative acts of the ingroup are attributed to circumstance. For Stephan et al (2009) these biases are amplified by threat. Such biases also make the outgroup easier to demonise and justifies aggression against them, politically, journalistically, and artistically. Another consequence is that attitudes towards the ingroup and its values might become more favourable than they would without the presence of outgroup threat.

It is expected that there will be a high level of threat-induced prejudice towards Muslims in the following analysis. Given the anonymity of comments and thus lack of personal accountability, users are also expected to be more explicit than implicit in their expressions of prejudice and anti-Muslim sentiment. A more detailed discussion of anonymous comments will take place in the subsequent chapter on methodology.



## Queer Theory

Queer theory is relevant to chapter 5 and 7 because they deal with criticisms towards Islam which are primarily relevant to sexual attitudes and categories of sexual identity. This follows on from ideas regarding social construction and discourse since such categories of classification have come under scholastic scrutiny within the past century.

The constructionist approach to sexuality holds that the character and understanding of sexuality can differ not only across, but also within the same society over time. Jeffrey Weeks (1986) in particular argues that sexuality is a product of culture as opposed to biology, and is malleable according to societal configurations of family structures, economic needs, political climate, cultural norms and religious ethics. All these social factors have a combined impact on sexuality, potentially giving rise to a limitless number of attitudes towards sex with the constant propensity for change. Others have labelled this new approach as a “plastic” sense of sexuality (Giddens 1992), and go as far to say that to even apply the term “sexuality” to pre-modern societies is mistaken, since the word itself only appeared in the English language in 1800 (Wiesner-Hanks 2010). Moreover, previous cultures did not focus or obsess over sex the way we do today (Phillips and Reay 2002). This constructionist or ‘plastic’ approach to sexuality opposes the “essentialist” understanding which sees sexuality as fixed in its biological and physical essence. The more traditional view in the western world, at least throughout the early modern period sees ‘sexuality’ as a rebellious energy, autonomous, with specific effects that should be repressed in various ways by society. In England, for example, attitudes and norms towards male-male penetration would have been partly influenced by legal sanctions which deemed the act to be a capital offence for a period between the 16th century to the 19th century. As Weeks (2002) illustrates, we have moved from conclusive statements such as “sex is dangerous” to asking, why sex is regarded as dangerous. The new model also sees sexuality as having multiple histories which all need to be understood in their own unique contexts. Indeed, there is no longer a perceived simple dichotomy of repression and liberation, rather

“Sexuality” as a domain of social interest and concern is produced by society in complex ways. It is a result of diverse social practices that give meaning to human activities, of social definitions and self-definitions, of struggles between those who have the power to define, and those who resist. Sexuality is not a given. It is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency (Weeks 2002: 30-31).

A number of scholarly works and discussions have helped to shift the idea of sexuality towards the constructionist approach. The cross-cultural anthropological study, *Patterns of Sexual Behaviour* (1951) from Ford and Beach supported the idea that both sexual behaviour and attitudes were learnt as opposed to being innate, since their sample of nearly 200 cultures worldwide showed striking variety on what societies considered “normal” sexuality. Michel Foucault's work on sexuality is also seen as a pivotal moment in the development of sexual historiography, reworking the narrative and challenging underlying basic assumptions. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978) Foucault argued that our concept of sexuality is not something absolute or essential, rather, it is something created and shaped by specific historical processes. Foucault was writing against the backdrop of liberation movements of the 60s & 70s associated with women's emancipation and sexual freedom. He takes issue with what he calls the “repressive hypothesis”, which envisions that prior to these 20<sup>th</sup> century movements – and in the Victorian era in particular – there had been a repression of sexuality. Foucault is less interested in this alleged repression and is more interested in how sex as a subject became more talked about, regulated and distributed through various disciplines and institutions during this time. Through legal sanctioning against ‘perversions’, for example, as well as the medical categorization and psychiatric treatment of sexual orientations, discourses on sexuality were created. Rather than a censoring of sexuality, then, the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards saw an ‘explosion of discourse’ (Phillips and Reay 2002); the opening up and multiplication of sexuality as something to be studied, obsessed, and worried about. Prior to these developments taking place, Foucault argues, there was far less relative attention paid to sexuality. Nagel (2003: 48) affirms this point claiming that sexuality, like ethnicity, is a matter of structure and power: “which sexual categories are available in the society to be sorted into, and who gets to do the sorting?” Nagel argues that sexual identities are negotiated between individuals and that these can alter according to the various social settings in which one finds themselves. People may have “portfolios of sexual identities”, some of which may be more dominant, while others are more hidden and might reveal themselves under specific circumstances with certain people. Such a layered and dynamic conception of sexuality, Nagel argues, is closer to the reality of human beings, producing sexual identities which may or may not fit into socially recognised sexual categories of the popular culture (Nagel 2003).

## Sexual “Identities”

The classification of sexual orientations is one important way in which modern discourses of sexuality have developed. The coming together of sexuality with scientific thinking in the 19th century created a culture of medical categorization and labelling in human sexuality. Phillips and Reay (2002) observe that the idea that there are only two or three sexual identities, and everyone must decide which they are is a very recent mode of structuring sexuality. Only in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, did the category “homosexual” emerge, and was established as a psychiatric disorder in Carl Westphal’s article on ‘Contrary Sexual Feeling’ (1870). Foucault describes this as the coming about of a “species” whose sexual orientation affected every part of his composition and actions. Paedophilia was also established as a category of sexual deviance around the same time, but did not gather nearly the same amount of attention as homosexuality (Angelides 2009), partly because a man’s marriage to a girl below the age of 16 was neither illegal nor socially abhorrent at the time. This point is particularly relevant to changing perceptions of the Prophet’s marriage to Aisha over the centuries. Phillips and Reay (2002) add that also recent is the notion that it is biological sex which exclusively defines the sexual object choice: a heterosexual will desire the opposite sex, a homosexual will desire the same sex, a bisexual may desire both, for instance. Historically, and especially in times of antiquity, there have been other considerations outside biological sex which not only predominantly factored into, but defined a person’s sexual practice, such as class, age, occupation, free/non-free, penetrator or receiver (irrespective of gender), as well as the degree of a person’s masculinity or femininity. For example, a man in ancient Greece may, in his practice of sexuality, be repelled by masculine men, exclusively preferring femininity, and therefore enjoy sexual acts with both women and young boys.

From as early as the 1950s, western thinkers have challenged the developed binary between hetero and homo-sexuality. Ford and Beach’s (1951) study, for example, demonstrated that these sexual identity labels of the late 19th century could not be applied to other cultures which simply did not fit their boxed and static parameters. Following Foucault, Mary McIntosh (1968) argued that not only is the binary between heterosexual and homosexual problematic, but that the conception of the ‘homosexual’ has in fact been a form of social control. In a society, which (in her time), condemned homosexuality, labelling individuals and behaviour as ‘homosexual’ established a clear-cut definition of what types of sexual behaviour were permissible and what were not. Furthermore, the labelling ensured that those who were

'guilty' of such sexual deviance always constituted a marginalised and recognisable sub-group, which could be monitored: "The creation of a specialized, despised, and punished role of homosexual keeps the bulk of society pure in rather the same way that the similar treatment of some kinds of criminals helps keep the rest of society law-abiding" (McIntosh 1968:35). McIntosh also speaks of a disadvantage to this type of labelling for it may cause individuals to become "fixed in their deviance". She pays regard to the idea that when a culture defines and labels people as distinct types, this may lead to "self-fulfilling prophecies" where such types become increasingly pronounced and polarised from one another. An interesting consequence of this, McIntosh argues, is that individuals might take on the label "homosexual" for themselves as a means to normalise their otherwise perceived 'deviant' behaviour within their own sexual category. For, indeed, to "be" a homosexual and to enact homosexual behaviour within that sexual construct is categorically 'normal'.

Over time, these categories have been increasingly added to as more ways have emerged to describe gender and sexuality. Modern trans-movements favour a continuum of sexuality and gender rather than a dichotomy between male and female, and tripartite division between straight, gay and bisexual. Facebook has recently demonstrated this change with the addition of 50+ "custom" options to self describe one's own gender. They include "Agender", "Bigender", "Gender Fluid", "Transfeminine"/"Transmasculine" and "Transexual Person". This would theoretically correspond to a similar increase in ways to describe one's sexuality. For example, preferring to identify as 'pansexual' over 'bisexual' since bi-sexuality conforms to a gender binary which does not reflect the variety of the people across the supposed gender spectrum, which includes transgender individuals.

Taking homosexuality and homosexual acts in the western world as an example, then, we can see that it has shifted from being an offence punishable by death, to being a pathological condition requiring treatment, to becoming a rising subculture facing social vilification, and now in more recent years, it has become a self-claimed identity with increasing acceptance in mainstream society. Other cultures, in particular, Islamic cultures, have not typically followed this pattern with perhaps the most striking difference being the absence of medicalising homosexual tendencies as a psychological illness, and constructing such 'deviances' as pathological identities. Dror Ze'evi (2006: 39) for example, notes that early Ottomans saw male passive intercourse as a preferential weakness rather than a disease needing treatment;

“it was part of the spectrum of normal sexual behaviour, and it was not to be considered deviant in any way”. Other sexual identity labels are also going through change. The ‘paedophile’ in the time of writing is far from being accepted in mainstream culture, but efforts - albeit in the minority - are increasingly being carried out to move away from a ‘monstrous’ perception towards seeing the inclination as a valid sexual orientation needing to be controlled.<sup>17</sup>

### Islamic Ethics

Finally, morally-laden criticisms towards Muslims will typically have a basis in their perceived beliefs and practices, regardless of whether the latter are correctly understood or misconceived. It is therefore useful to outline how morality is defined in Islam, and why tensions with western values might come about (Ali 2006, Brown 2014).

Briefly, the values of Islam have two primary prescriptive foundations. These are the Qur’an and the actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. Through a period of revelation, the Qur’an addressed the moral behaviour of the Meccan people re-affirming universal positive principles such as kindness to parents and looking after orphans, to prohibiting more specific practices ranging from burying daughters alive to overstaying your welcome as a guest. The personality of the Prophet Muhammad accompanied the revealed moral criteria and was a living example of it. Indeed, in the Islamic conception, the Prophet Muhammad is the final messenger of a long succession of prophets and messengers sent to human societies carrying a theological and moral message as part of God’s existential promise to offer guidance to mankind. Humanity, created morally-sensitive with various desires pertaining to an ego (*nafs*), may then strive within the contours of this guidance as much as they are able, or reject the message entirely. Not all the moral messages of the prophets were exactly the same, nor did they necessarily have the same ethical emphasis since every society to whom a prophet was sent would have developed their own moral ethos and social particularities. However, the Prophet Muhammad’s message, uniquely intended for humanity as a whole, is seen as the perfection of the divine message, and his example, the perfection of human character. Moral values in the Islamic tradition, therefore, are not born of human rationality nor deduced from

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<sup>17</sup> For example, Channel 4 documentary *The Paedophile Next Door* (2014) sought to humanise an individual who struggled with his sexual inclinations towards children and wished never to act upon them. The broadcast had intended to challenge the assumption that paedophilia was synonymous for child abuser.

principles of human reason. They are externally founded by a divine source, sometimes revealed in text, but most often personified through prophets. Moral injunctions may therefore appear contrary to dominant and popular conceptions of rational morality in the modern world (Brown 2014). Herein lies what is at the heart of this investigations, and is explored with four topical issues in the chapters that follow.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

The main methodological objective of this research is to investigate the perceptions of Muslims and Islam conveyed in online comments, targeting four specific issues of contention: veiling, homosexuality, polygamy, and the Prophet's marriage to Aisha. This will be complemented by an examination of how each point of contention has changed in the way it is criticised by comparing modern sentiments with earlier English/European opinions addressing the same issue.

### The Data

I have decided to gather modern attitudes of non-Muslims towards Islam and Muslims by analyzing user-generated content in the form of comments posted beneath British online news articles relating to Islam or Muslims. This differs quite significantly from previous media studies on Islamophobia, which have tended to focus on the styles and content of the actual published newspaper articles themselves (Poole 2002, Richardson 2004, Elgamri 2008, Baker et al 2013). Moreover, there have been studies like that of van Dijk (1991) and Poole (2002), which also carried out interviews to see the extent of influence the press had on its readers. This was at a time where online commenting, as we know of it today, did not exist. I hope to show that online comments are a sound and sometimes preferable equivalent to such research looking at the opinions of readers and media influence.

The qualitative approach undertaken is appropriate to the philosophical nature of the research question. Values and opinions of people can be sophisticated and nuanced with various layers of thought for analysis. Qualitative approaches to such data are better suited to clarifying such complexity into manageable parts (Bryman 2004). Historical context and social environment will also have a strong bearing on the nature of comments, which again require more qualitative approaches for elucidation. In particular, I will be adopting critical discourse analysis, as discussed in the previous chapter, which assists in interpreting social issues and in revealing underlying meanings (Mogashoa 2014).

User-generated content, also known as 'participatory journalism', has grown exponentially since the beginning of the 21st century. The result has been a collapsing of the professional

distance between journalist and their readers. Those who were traditionally seen as the passive audience of journalism now have the opportunity to engage with a news article, and with each other, to create a more multifaceted and democratic journalistic experience (Singer 2011, Manosevitch & Walker 2009). Comments, discussion forums, and user blogs are amongst the more popular forms of user generated content, but other forms continue to be innovated as online media evolves.

The impact of participatory journalism is increasingly relevant as online comments continue to become an integral part of how we experience news and the information world in general. Prior to the rise of user comments on articles, social scientists had restricted their studies of online debates to forums and discussion sites, but now, comments in news sites offer another avenue for further data. A number of studies have indicated the benefits of studying online comments, claiming them to be “a rich source of qualitative data that reflect public opinions and provide insight into how decisions are made and beliefs formed” (Henrich and Holmes 2013: 1). In times of political and social polarisation within a nation, they act as a useful indicator - alongside surveys and opinion polls - to understand general public perceptions and stances on current issues and debates. The volume of comments that a particular news article receives also offers an insight into the extent of interest or passion readers have for a particular subject.

Comments can take a variety of forms usually articulating an opinion relevant to the news article in question. As will be shown in this study, opinions conveyed across online comments may often appear more varied than those of the news articles themselves on a given topic. This is due to the wide range of personal, situational, and cultural frames of understanding that any news reader may have (van Dijk 1991). Commenters can express agreement or disagreement to an issue put forward with a potential honesty that would not otherwise be offered in person. They may also post correctional or additional information to the subject of the article, which may be anecdotal or presented as fact. Jokes and expressions of support/praise can also be made by users. Perhaps more engaging is the possibility for commenters to respond to one another, creating debates on certain issues which may reflect wider debates in society.



The sociological use of online comments as a form of data is a relatively new phenomenon, and therefore so too are the methodological approaches for analysing such data (Henrich and Holmes 2013). Models of commenting online and the formulation of how users interact are also varied and are continuously being modified by news sites in order to facilitate the most informative and fruitful discussions (Herminda and Thurman 2007). This makes methodological consistency across such studies difficult. An important consideration, however, is the breadth of representation achievable from selected articles. The more articles that are selected from a single news source, the better their commenters are represented. For this reason, I will at times be examining multiple articles from the same news source on the same issue (for example, Muslim polygamy), lest I should overlook important distinctions between comment sections beneath articles addressing the same issue in different ways. To broaden public representation more generally, I will be selecting articles from across different news sources addressing the same issue.

### The Papers

I have chosen to examine content of newspapers online as opposed to those in print. The obvious reason for this is the lack of user-generated content supplied by printed media, but additionally, the number of readers of an online news site will now typically far outnumber the readers of its printed equivalent (Singer et al 2011). This emphasises the centrality of online media as a source of news, and therefore places it in better stead to represent the views of the public.

The online papers being examined are the *Huffington Post UK*, the *Guardian.co.uk*, and the *Mail Online*. If I struggle to find enough coverage on an issue from these three core outlets, I will draw on other articles within the same news sources, depending on the article subject, popularity, and comment availability. It is hoped that the variety of online papers will help to provide an aggregate of discussion data on a single topic (Schuth et al 2007), while at the same time, reveal general distinctions in perspective (if any) amongst the readership of each news site. A major reason for choosing these news sites is their significant facilitation of user-generated comments for the current analysis. Not all major new sites provide this feature, and

many sites are deciding to cease online comments altogether.<sup>18</sup> Part of the reason for these core outlet choices is their high online popularity as nationally-read online sources. At the time of writing, the *Huffington Post* is the world's most popular and most recommended online blogging site<sup>19</sup>, while the *Mail Online* is now the UK's leading online newspaper, followed by the *Guardian.co.uk*<sup>20</sup> Thus it is safe to assume that these are the online 'go-to' places for a significant number of the British online-reading population, serving as a suitable resource of representative impressions. Their high popularity is also indicative of their potentially high influence on the British public (Baker et al 2013). In order to gather as wide a sample of perspectives as possible, a spectrum of left, right and central/neutral political opinions have been sought. The *Huffington Post* claims no political leanings while the *Mail Online* and the *Guardian* are known to be right and left leaning, respectively. It is hoped that the contrast will reveal some significant distinctions of their own. Should distinctions be discovered, caution will need to be exercised in determining whether these will be due to the readership differences between news sources, the content of the article selected, or attitudes towards the writer.<sup>21</sup>

The articles themselves will be chosen through Google searches and previously set up Google News Alerts with keywords based on the topic being addressed for the current analysis (veiling, Muslim polygamy, homosexuality in Islam, and the Prophet's Marriage to Aisha). Articles will also be incorporated into the study based on the availability and number of comments posted. I will have read and considered more articles than I am able to discuss. The time period from which all the articles were published; (2010-2015) renders them fairly recent to the current study, reflecting modern day opinions. At the same time, they are a significant time away from the events of 9/11, and may therefore offer insights into how perceptions have since shifted. Papers will be chosen according to their ability to reflect the broader relevant themes and debates regarding the issue being examined. Others might be chosen because they address a particular angle which reveals other interesting perspectives

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<sup>18</sup> "What happened after 7 news sites got rid of reader comments" <http://www.niemanlab.org/2015/09/what-happened-after-7-news-sites-got-rid-of-reader-comments/>

"No Comment: Why news sections are ditching comment sections" <http://mashable.com/2014/12/17/no-comment/#3l0b0q3oj0q5>

<sup>19</sup> "Top 10 Most Popular Blogs" <http://webtrends.about.com/od/profile1/tp/Top-10-Most-Popular-Blogs.htm>

<sup>20</sup> "The World's Top 10 Newspaper Websites" <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/table/2011/apr/19/worlds-top-10-newspaper-websites>

<sup>21</sup> "The Dark Side of Guardian Comments" <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/apr/12/the-dark-side-of-guardian-comments>

from the public. Rarely, an article might be chosen due to lack of options, though its comments will still be relevant to the discussion. Once comments are organised thematically, trends, divisions, and popular perspectives will become more apparent. This will also lend itself to a comparison with views of the past. Seeing as the article content will be different from one article to another - even within the same news source - a clear comparison between news sources might be difficult. For example, an emotionally provocative article might be published in the *Huffington Post*, giving rise to aggressive and offensive comments, while the *Guardian* might present a calmer angle on the same theme, producing milder, more considered comments. Hence, I predict that the content of the article will have a stronger impact on the nature of the responses than the news sources themselves. While I think it is important to note differences between comments from one news source to the other should they come up, due to limitation of relevant comment-filled articles, I might not always cover all three news sources for every chapter.

Comments across news sites are typically identified with a username which does not typically consist of a real full name. As of December 2013, the *Huffington Post* has required that personal Facebook profiles be linked to users before making a comment, in hope to increase civility and accountability.<sup>22</sup> However, most of the articles I have used predated this change so it is understood that users across all three news sites have generally engaged with the freedom to remain anonymous. Both the *Mail Online* and *Huffington Post* also display the city/town or country where the commenter is from, and personal profile pictures are optional across all sites. While it is normally appropriate to add “[sic]” whenever a spelling mistake or grammatical error arises in a comment, I have chosen not to include this in the reproduction of quotes because sometimes the mistakes are so numerous that it would interrupt the flow of reading. Furthermore, some apparent errors might be intentional, given the freedom for informal writing. The comments will thus be displayed (literally copied and pasted) just as they are.

The comment-interface for the online papers being analysed all adopt a time-entry format showing the most recent comment first. Although this has been shown to be a less engaging form of interface (Faridani et al 2010), it is still the most common. Of the three papers being looked at, the *Mail Online*, is unique in having an additional interface option whereby one can

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<sup>22</sup> “Turning the Page on Anonymity” *The Huffington Post*, Oct 12 2013 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-mcdonald/end-of-anonymity\\_b\\_4418630.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-mcdonald/end-of-anonymity_b_4418630.html)

choose to sort comments in ranks of best and worst rated. On all three sites users are also able to rate or “like” other comments. These features will often be incorporated into the analysis as they offer a measure of representativeness for an even wider audience than the commenters themselves since more people rate comments than write them.

All comments posted beneath every article will be considered, except where stated, including comments which might not directly relate to the article’s subject matter. Such off-topic comments can be important for seeing how certain issues trigger other concerns. They might also indicate something about the readership character of a particular news source. I will also try to avoid over representation by being aware of commenters who post multiple times. The table below shows the basic details of the papers being studied ranging from January 2010 to November 2015. Over 6000 comments from a minimum of 15 articles will be examined.

<b>New Source</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Headline</b>	<b>Total No. of Comments</b>
The Huffington Post	04/02/2013	Sheikh Abdullah Daoud, Saudi Arabian Cleric Issues Fatwa Calling For Female Babies To Wear Burkas	439
The Huffington Post	15/07/2011	UK Unlikely To Ban Burqa After Belgium And France, Says Key Muslim Organisation	904
The Huffington Post	08/04/2010	Why I Hate the Burqa -- And Yes, I Wear One	122
The Guardian	25/7/2010	If Britain decides to ban the burqa I might just start wearing one	807
Mail Online	19/3/2012	Muslim juror who refused to take veil off is ordered to stand down by judge because he wouldn't be able to see her facial expressions	835
Mail Online	4/11/2015	My father tried to ‘cure’ my homosexuality by performing an EXORCISM on me, says former Muslim extremist who fantasised about blowing up Canary Wharf but has now left Islam	44

The Huffington Post	20/05/2013	As a Muslim, I Struggle With the Idea Of Homosexuality – But I Oppose Homophobia	447
The Huffington Post	12/03/2012	Gay Muslims: The Elephant in the (Prayer) Room	37
The Huffington Post	06/12/2012	Muslim Community needs to 'Stop Avoiding' Gay Issue, Says Student	64
Mail Online	17/9/2014	The woman who dropped out of Cambridge PhD to enter into a polygamous marriage to Muslim businessman with two other wives	676
The Guardian	20/2/2009	Wasi wades in	206
The Guardian	2/1/2010	Polygamy for all	329
The Guardian	17/9/2012	The truth about Muhammad and Aisha	1396 (first 400 considered)
Mail Online	9/8/2012	British executive facing jail in Dubai after calling Prophet Mohammad a 'complete paedophile' in text message to Muslim colleague	22
Mail Online	25/1/2013	Muslim abuser who 'didn't know' that sex with a girl of 13 was illegal is spared jail	1005

### Advantages

Online comments offer insights into public attitudes on issues that are immediate and spontaneous. They are a resource for gathering wide access to numerous opinions quickly, and can be received in real-time, providing the most up-to-date views (Henrich and Holmes

2013). This form of communication is strongly distinguished from, say, an interview, focus group or even surveys, not only due to the sheer numerical wealth of opinions, but due to the key factor of anonymity and the 'social desirability bias' (Bryman 2004, Krumpal 2011). With sensitive subjects such as attitudes towards religion, race, or gender, there are obvious challenges in gathering authentic impressions from individuals due to the fear of being judged for what might be socially deemed xenophobic, racist, or sexist and so on. There is no necessary consistency between what one thinks in private and what one vocally conveys to the public, and in fact, the two can be entirely conflicting. Commenting online, therefore, 'frees' the user in a number of important ways through a process of "deindividuation", also known as "the online disinhibition effect" (Suler 2004). The user is able to reveal as little about his or her identity as he or she wishes. Nancy Baym (2010) points out that "on a societal level, anonymity opens the possibility of liberation from the divisions that come about from seeing one another's race, age, gender, disabilities and so on" (Baym 2010: 34).

Online media researchers had also predicted that such anonymity would lead to a higher potential for negatively loaded emotional communication, since the virtual environment is removed from the norms of politeness and civility in real life (Baym 2010). However, the comments on the following newspaper sites are still moderated to a degree. This prevents outright swearing and insults, which one finds typically on a site such as YouTube where comments are not moderated.

Perhaps the most important question is the extent to which comments do in fact represent the opinions of the general public. Given that in this present study, thousands of comments are being examined - and within those comments, particular sentiments are consistently repeated - it is modestly hoped that the opinions are at least representative of a significant segment of the British population. Furthermore, there has been research carried out into the extent to which online comments actually influence the opinion of news readers (Lee and Jang 2010). It is, therefore, not simply a question of whether or not online comments reflect general public opinions, but evidence would suggest that online comments now play a significant role in shaping public opinion. Typically, a reader may assess the various standpoints expressed in a comment section before establishing their own perspective. A further study has also shown that in some cases, readers are more influenced by other people's comments than the article

itself (Yang 2008), albeit, this was relevant to readers who demonstrated a lower capacity of analytical ability.

### Limitations/Challenges

As touched upon above, a potential limitation with this method is the extent to which such commenters are representative of the general British public. One study had pointed out that only 2.5% of online news readers of a particular site would bother to leave a comment (Kim and Hong 2009, cited in Lee and Jang 2010). An American Consumer Survey by Ad Age also looked into the issue and found that only 15% of readers either “always” or “often” comment on stories.<sup>23</sup> Thus generalizability of opinions online would seem inappropriate due to the small sample size. Furthermore, the kinds of sentiments which tend to be conveyed might also be unrepresentative of the wider population. This is partly due to ‘the online disinhibition effect’, which purports that people lose constraints on their behaviour when their identity is not disclosed. Even when such forums were in their early stages, it was not uncommon for writers to note that many such comments were generally “raw, racist, sexist, and revolting” (Howell 2007: 6). The negativity of user-comments has at times been felt to be so significant, that news sites have retracted the ability for users to leave comments altogether.<sup>24</sup> More recent studies have sought to address the usefulness of online comment forums and note that there is still much to be improved upon in the way information is shared therein (Santana 2011). Perhaps more relevant to human psychology is the question of whether or not online commenting draws in particular individuals, or brings about undesirable traits within publically decent individuals, or is genuinely reflective of what people are too afraid to say in public. It is likely that there is truth in all three suggestions to various degrees. In any case, the correlation between “civility” and “anonymity” are increasingly under study. For example, recent research compared comments on news stories addressing immigration from sites that either did or did not allow their comments to be anonymous. The results were that the sites which allowed anonymous commenting were far more uncivil (Santana 2014).

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<sup>23</sup> “Stat of the Day: 63% of Readers Don’t Care About Your Comments”, *Advertising Age*, Aug 19 2011  
<http://adage.com/article/adagestat/63-readers-care-site-comments/229341/>

<sup>24</sup> Regarding popular science website: “popsci.com”. “Why We’re Shutting Off Our Comments”, *Pop-Sci* Sep 24 2013  
<http://www.popsci.com/science/article/2013-09/why-were-shutting-our-comments>

An individual's sense of self-esteem has also been highlighted as a factor influencing perceived threat and prejudiced beliefs, and therefore also factors into studying online commenting. People with low self-esteem are more likely to feel threatened and react with uncivil and prejudiced opinions than people with high self-esteem who might be less likely to feel threatened (Stephan et al 2009). If there is enough evidence to show that people who comment online are usually of low self-esteem, this could mean that the negative sentiments posted are merely a reflection of a certain type of individual, not the public at large. However, given that there is also an abundance of positive, humorous, educated, and more sympathetic comments posted online in these data samples, it becomes unnecessary to assume that all or even most commenters are suffering from low self-esteem.

Further possible limitations of the online data source revolve around the uncertainty of the demographics of users. Given the anonymity of most users, comments can at best only be categorized as a voice from the general public. Age and especially gender distinctions could have otherwise been interesting, and where credible names have been provided, it is uncertain whether or not those names correspond with the reality of the person behind the comment. Due to the inconsistency of username usage and the possible inauthenticity of identities, usernames will not be included in this study. Another limitation is not being able to confirm the sincerity and honesty of the views expressed. Some users might post opinions which they, in reality, do not hold to be true. This could be for the sake of humour or personal attention, or purely to cause controversy, for example. It is also known that there exist services, which, for a fee, offer fabricated comments to promote, condemn, or review items online. However, such comments – should they exist in my samples at all – are only likely to account for a minority of all comments. The hope is that looking at thousands of comments should negate or radically reduce these limitations.

Dissenting voices, such as those of some Muslims or Muslim sympathisers make up what van Dijk (1991) would frame as deviant voices from the racist, or anti-Muslim norm. Van Dijk (1991: 34) claims that these deviations “may take any form between unconscious variation and conscious resistance.” It should be noted that individuals who fall into more ‘unconscious variation’ forms of dissent may not actually comment on an article, even if they disagree with its anti-Muslim narrative. Their dissent might simply remain in their silence, feeling that it is pointless to offer a more balanced single opinion within a flow of aggressive negativity. The



perceived inevitability of being repetitively 'disliked' by other users, might also discourage expressing a dissenting view. Thus there might be many more people who do not ascribe to the anti-Muslim norm than comments suggest. Those who consciously resist the anti-Muslim narrative, however, are more likely to comment on a given article. It should also be noted that the most offensive comments will have been moderated out of the comment section of any given paper being examined.

Finally, it is not certain whether or not comments are indeed written by non-Muslims. This is only assumed from their attitudes, which appear consistent with general attitudes towards Muslims from non-Muslims documented across other relevant media and academic research.

### The Classical Views

For more historical perceptions of Islam and Muslims regarding the four morally contentious issues, I will be looking at a variety of historical and academic sources. Given that the issues are so specific, relevant attitudes will be selected when and where they are found. Norman Daniel's extensive works on European perceptions of Islam, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (1993) and *Islam, Europe, and Empire* (1996) will be particularly useful for gathering medieval and Victorian perspectives. Aside from perhaps the topic of sexuality, references to my other points of interest are sparsely referred to and often difficult to find. There may be no single text or reference dealing with the Muslim veil or the Prophet's Marriage to Aisha from the European medieval period, for example, but it is exactly the subsequent appearance of certain discourses, as well as the waxing and waning of certain contentions, which is also being investigated.

For Victorian views of certain aspects of Islam, I will be using a number of works from early scholars, in particular the biographies of the Prophet Muhammad by European thinkers, William Muir (1878), and Edward Sell (1913), as well as John J. Pool's *Studies in Mohammedanism* (1892). Some of these texts appear in Victorian British newspaper articles which, for ease of comparison, share a number of similarities with the British press today. A modern free press had emerged by the 19th century which made journalistic and editorial practices more comparable to those of today. International issues - particularly regarding the British Empire - were also far more prevalent than in previous newsbooks of the early

modern period, which tended to be more exclusive to domestic news (Baker et al 2013). With such texts from the Victorian era, I will naturally seek and prioritise sources that reflect the attitudes of Britain and, where relevant, England. However, the overall investigation is also likely to incorporate texts written by other European writers who had corresponding opinions about Islam. Late 20th Century texts representing Islam in the media are also relevant, particularly because they predate 9/11, whereafter anti-Muslim discourses shifted and intensified. This allows us to investigate changes in criticism within more recent decades. Such works include that of Elizabeth Poole (2002) and John Richardson (2004), who look at papers from the 90s.

An important question arises regarding the continuity and comparison of opinions of the past and present. Is it fair to compare the attitudes of travellers, professionals and religious figures who wrote openly in the past about Islam with modern online comments? Here it is important to highlight the similarity of unbounded expression. Both writers of the past and modern (usually anonymous) online commenters are unhindered by the confines of political correctness and therefore share more in common with regards to their apparent frankness. Europeans of the Victorian age, for example, had little need to tailor their words for fear of offending Muslims or for being accused of racism or hate speech. Mockingly negative remarks of an entire population could therefore be made directly and overtly without repercussions. As we have discussed above, this is also true for online commenters with regards to the social desirability bias. On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that the opinions from early sources are from travelers, religious authorities, and establishment personalities, who are usually of a certain (higher) social class and level of education. The comments and opinions analyzed for the purpose of this study are from the general population who may vary considerably in class and education. At the same time, it has been assumed that when it came to the understanding of Muslims and Islam, early opinions of establishment figures did very often correspond with the opinions with the man on the street (Daniels 1993). Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that given the disparity in the types of material being analysed, this is not a systematic comparison of views, nor am I undertaking a systematic survey of the classical views.

Chapters that follow will typically begin with a sociological background relevant to the topic as well as an overview of how the relevant issue was perceived historically. This will be

followed by a presentation of modern opinions from online comments. The attitudes of today will be discussed both in and of themselves, as well as with reference to how the criticism has changed over time.

## Chapter 4: The Veil

'Women in Islam' is one of the longest on-going and most contentious topics within anti-Muslim discourse. Writers since the Victorian period have been consistent in singling out the position of Muslim women as a point of contention, particularly in contrast to European attitudes towards women idealised around values of equality and liberty (Daniel 1966, Ahmed 1992). Such comparisons continue today, with shifting focus from orientalist perceptions of the exotically sensual harem and polygamous lust, to the oppression of women under religious patriarchy, and an othering-obsession with Muslim women's dress (El Guindi 1999, Bullock 2007). Indeed, the Muslim veil itself has been associated with oppression by European thinkers since at least the 18th century, but gained particular focus in the 19th century when European colonialism settled in the Middle East (Ahmed 1992, Bullock 2007). Over the last decade or more, the veil - in both its hair and face-covering guises - has become the most controversial issue within the subject of women in Islam, and is one of the most significant 'symbolic threats' (Stephan et al 2009) denoting a major sign of the 'problem of Islam' in Europe (Scott 2007).

The Muslim veil conveniently fits into a pre-existing paradigm within anti-Muslim discourse in Europe; that is, that Muslims are backward, statically traditional, anti-enlightenment/progression, and oppressive to women. Poole (2002) conceptualises this in a comparative framework wherein Muslim practices are made to look archaic and strange in comparison to the majority culture, while the practices of the dominant group are generally not challenged, but presupposed. The condition of Muslim women and their veils are therefore used as a 'proof' of the backwardness of Muslim culture, cementing such perceptions in the minds of the social majority. The way in which Islam is criticized tends to reflect the opposing values of the critiquing community (Flood 2012). In the current context, emphasizing Muslim discrimination against women, does not only discredit Islam, but simultaneously highlights and celebrates western values of gender equality and liberation.

The symbolic threat of the veil has become increasingly prominent in recent years. For Khiabany and Williamson (2008) the issue of Muslim dress in the media has classically been linked with patriarchal oppression and backwardness, but the discourse, they claim, has been transformed: "it is now a symbol of a stubborn refusal to accept 'our' culture or to embrace

modernity; it is a sign of defiance and an image of menace” (Khiabany and Williamson 2008: 70). Zebiri (2008) similarly argues that the hijab, along with other Muslim gender-themed issues, are “represented in much of the discourse as challenging or negating some of the most cherished and recently-won “Western” values of human rights, female emancipation, and sexual liberation” (Zebiri 2008: 21). The perception fits the linearly progressive social paradigm wherein the western world allegedly advances while the Muslim world remains static and resistant to change (Said 1997, Samman 2012). Moreover, the veil has become an easily-identifiable and everyday symbol through which to channel other aspects of anti-Muslim discourse (Scott 2007).

Current news reports in the British (and non-British) media at the time of writing are scattered with articles concerning Muslim women and the face-veil (*niqab* or *burqa*)<sup>25</sup> in particular. In a corpus study of 200,000 articles from the British Press from 1998-2009, the term ‘Muslim women’ was found almost twice as frequently as the term ‘Muslim men’, and when it was used, it was most often in context of whether or not they should wear the veil (Baker et al 2013). News items found by a Google Alert notification service with terms “*burqa*” “*burka*”, “veil” and “*niqab*” from November 2014 to July 2016 found repeated points of coverage usually themed around the veil being a social problem and nuisance; for example, reporting criminal activity such as assault or theft being carried out by people wearing the *niqab*. Also common is the reporting of cases in which the *niqab* is worn by a female court attendant or by teachers in schools, supposedly hindering their ability to carry out their respective roles. Such cases are used to demonstrate how the face-veil simply does not fit into modern secular society. Less common but also recurring are reports of women in *niqab* being attacked by perpetrators of anti-Muslim hate, as well as experiences of women wearing the *niqab* including non-Muslim women who wear it as a trial temporarily. The most common UK coverage regarding the *niqab*, however, centres around the debate as to whether or not it should be banned due to its cultural misplacement as a symbol of oppression, and as a security risk.

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<sup>25</sup> The Muslim ‘veil’ in the media is referred to in a range of different ways, making what is being covered somewhat ambiguous. For example, “the full veil”, “the full-body veil”, “the face-covering veil”, or the veil covering “all but the eyes” (Baker et al 2013: 203). There is also the ‘*hijab*’, which, when used by the media, is usually referring to the hair and neck covering alone. For this study we are exclusively focused on the face-veil, commonly referred to the *niqab* or *burqa*. I will be using these three terms equivalently.

## Construction of a Discourse

A number of key moments in recent history have contributed to the construction of the veil/*burqa* ban discourse in the UK. Former home and foreign secretary Jack Straw is believed to have ignited the issue in October 2006, when he had published an article<sup>26</sup> claiming that the *niqab* is a “visible statement of separation and of difference” which is “bound to make better, positive relations between the two communities more difficult.” A statement from someone who holds such a position in society plays a powerful role in constructing boundaries of discourse (van Dijk 2015). Indeed, Baker et al’s (2013) study looking at the appearance of the word *burqa* and *veil*, as well as the their synonyms in the British press from the years 1998 to 2009, found that there was a strong increase in their usage in 2006, prior to which little interest was paid. News reports following Straw’s 2006 article not only continued to address the veil-ban debate, but quoted his words repeatedly, embedding the discourse in the media narrative (Baker et al 2013). Also significant to structuring the modern veil discourse was the precedent set by both Belgium and France – two of the UK’s nearest neighboring European countries – by banning the veil in 2010 and 2011, respectively. These bans, unprecedented in European history<sup>27</sup>, have heavily helped shape the framework in which the veil is understood at the time of writing as a controversial and unwanted symbol of oppression with dubious legal status. Following Belgium’s ban, a UK YouGov 2010 survey showed that 67% of Britons also supported a ban in Britain.<sup>28</sup>

Historically, the veil was not problematised the way it is today. Baker et al’s (2013) research into 19th century British news articles shows that there was hardly any mention of the veil in the context of Muslim women, nor was it ever discussed as a topic of central focus. For example, a rare reference in a December 1881 issue of *The Pall Mall Gazette*<sup>29</sup> addresses mountain life in Algeria, and praises the Berber people for being unlike the Arabs and more like the Aryan races of Europe: “They are more industrious and more agricultural than the

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<sup>26</sup> “Straw in plea to Muslim women: Take off your veils” *Lancashire Evening Telegraph*, Oct 5 2006  
<http://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/954145.straw-in-plea-to-muslim-women-take-off-your-veils/>

<sup>27</sup> However, banning the veil has not been an exclusively European phenomenon. Middle Eastern countries such as Iran and Syria had imposed bans and restrictions on veiling before European bans. Even prior to these bans, early Egyptian feminist, Qassim Amin’s “The Liberation of Women” (1899) may have been one of the first to call for an abolition of the veil as part of social reform in Egypt and the Muslim world in general. But these were based on Lord Cromer’s views. Indeed, consistent with these earlier desires to forbid the veil in the Middle East was the presence of western influence, whether in the form of secularism, American culture or British colonial presence.

<sup>28</sup> Burqa ban: <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2010/07/21/burqa-ban/>

<sup>29</sup> *The Pall Mall Gazette*, “Mountain Life in Algeria” (London, England), Thursday, December 22, 1881; Issue 5249

Arabs; their laws and institutions are more democratic... [t]hey may confidently be said to be the least bigoted of any people professing Mohammedanism; they seldom go to the mosque... and their women go about freely without the veil of Islam.” Here the veil is negatively portrayed as an attachment to Islam and Muslim practice in general, which is, *a priori*, framed negatively. A possible reason offered by Baker et al (2013) for the lack of veil referencing up to the late 19th century is that women in both Muslim and western nations at the time were somewhat equivalent in status. It was not until the late 19th/20th century that feminist movements would begin to generate a distinction between cultures, allowing negative criticisms of Muslim women’s dress to ensue. Leila Ahmed (1992) adds the contributing factor of European colonial presence in Muslims lands, which continuously defined itself as culturally superior. The idea that Muslim men in colonised societies oppressed their women was used to justify the colonial project of undermining and eradicating cultures of colonised people. To this effect, the veil and segregation were characteristics which epitomized the oppression of women, rendering them primary targets of colonial forces. As feminism and perceptions of cultural superiority continued to develop in the West, so did the critique of Muslim women and their alleged oppression, in which the veil was its most obvious symbol. Still, domestically, there was no focus on the veil in and of itself until the 21st century. Studies of Islamophobia and religious references in the British media in the 80s and 90s show that neither the headscarf nor the face-veil typically made mainstream news (Poole 2002<sup>30</sup>, Knott 1984), and even within academia, El Guindi notes the lack of exclusively focused study given to the veil prior to her publication, “Veil” in 1999. Despite a growth of research interest for women in the Middle East since the 1970s, such studies tended to focus more on gender roles, rather than on the veil itself.

### Constructing the Meaning of the Veil

The modern western construction of the veil as a symbol of oppression is made even more acute when we take into account meanings of the veil outside the modern, western world, or devoid of any specific cultural association. In its essential sense, veiling is the act of covering; the act of concealing something, usually from the eyes or minds of others. Veiling, therefore, has an inherent sense of mystery attached to it, which may complement the spiritually inclined themes to which it is often attached. Historically, veiling has also been associated

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<sup>30</sup> An exception is found in the coverage of Sara Cook’s 1997 “child bride” story – Sarah’s photo in the *hijab* symbolized restraint and vulnerability to a Turkish man who was made out to be cruel and sexually deviant (Poole 2002: 110).

with class and respect. An Assyrian legal text estimated at around 1450-1250 BC states that veiling was compulsory for noble women, but not for servants, except when accompanying other noble women. From the same text, slave girls were forbidden to veil, and "*hierodules*" (sacred prostitutes) could only veil after marriage. In this context, the veil not only marked the upper classes, but signaled which women were under the protection of a man through marriage and therefore, not sexually available (Ahmed 1992: 15). The Assyrian tradition thus demonstrates a historical example in which veiling was linked to social stratification with dignifying value. Even in modern examples of veiling outside religion – whether in the form of veiling one's car with a physical sheet, or in the drawing of house curtains – the concealing is not, by default, linked to any sense of oppression or subordination, but rather, to the intent of protection from the prying eyes of those who may desire or be drawn to what should not concern them. A parallel can be made with the intent of handsome pre-Islamic Arab men, who would veil to protect themselves from the harms of envy, or women's clothing in classical Greek society (550-323 BC), which served the function of concealing them from the eyes of strange men (El Guindi 1999). In these instances, the common theme is that veiling is about the visual protection of what can be envied or desired, not about segregation or oppression.

El Guindi (1999) comes to the understanding that the veil, far from being "indiscriminate, monolithic, and ambiguous" can be appropriated to different cultural contexts to have different meanings from modesty and isolation, to identity and political resistance. Similarly, Faegheh Shirazi (2001) points out that various interpretations and representations of the veil across various cultures and contexts shows that its symbolic significance is constantly defined and redefined. This social constructionist approach to the veil gives the impression that its meaning is malleable according to whatever purpose is required: "the veil has been exploited by advertisers of Western products in the United States and in Saudi Arabia, by publishers of Western erotica, by filmmakers in the East and West, by Iranian politicians and clergy, and by militaries and militias in countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Iraq" (Shirazi 2001: 138). To elaborate one example, Shirazi argues that many popular Bollywood films use the veil and the fantasy of hidden beauty to draw the male gaze by titillating the audience. There is a basic assumption that the female form has more power to arouse its viewer when it is veiled than nude. Both imagery and song lyrics are used to attract sensual interest to a veiled heroine who is beseeched by an eager hero desiring to see her unveiled. In such contexts, the veil is used as a means of sexual empowerment for the heroine, and as a tool for



creating sexual tension in general (Shirazi 2001). This is in contrast with the veil in Iranian cinema, which, under the rules of state censorship following the Islamic revolution, prohibited the sight of uncovered female bodies in public and on screen. The veil is thus used to divert the male gaze away from sexualizing female characters. Both representations sit firmly within a spectrum of sexuality; one embellishing it, and the other obscuring it. For Homa Hoodfar (1992), the ability for the veil's meaning to be changed and re-defined is in no way symmetrical between the East and West. She argues instead that the meaning of the veil in the West has been "static and unchanging" while in Muslim cultures, the significance and social functions of the veil have varied tremendously, especially during times of rapid social change (Hoodfar 1992). She explains how some women in Iran have even used the veil to undermine certain men in their presence: while in dispute with a male non-relative, a Muslim woman might drop her veil to show that she doesn't perceive him as a real man. These expressions and functions of the veil challenge the blanket "symbol of oppression" narrative that is commonplace in the UK and Europe, demonstrating the narrowness of the western discourse, and by implication, reflect the prevalence of the structures that keep such a discourse in place.

### [Meaning of the Veil in Arab/Islamic Space and Culture](#)

In considering such discourses surrounding the veil it is important to emphasize the paradigm to which the Muslim veil is predominantly attached. In this vein, El Guindi (1999) allows the Islamic tradition to play an important part in dictating the meaning of the veil. In doing so, she stresses the "multiple dimensions", that is, the different layers of meaning that can be attached to religious customs, seeing Muslims as living rhythmic lives which alternate between the sacred and the secular. She combines these ideas with philosophical and sociological assumptions about the private and the public realm, highlighting how privacy in Arab and Islamic contexts differs from the secular, western context. Where privacy is usually understood as the right to not be intruded upon in the modern secular world, Islamic culture, for El Guindi, harbours an added theological dynamic whereby an individual or collective may be in some spiritual activity in communication with God, or be going about some relational (often gendered) activity with God in mind. From the women-exclusive private residential quarters of the harem typical to pre-modern Islamic Caliph residences, to the dhikr circles of Sufi orders, the notion of gendered privacy has been a social fact of Muslim history:

“Arab privacy does not connote the “personal” or the “secret” or the “individuated space.” It concerns two core spheres – women and the family. For both, privacy is sacred and carefully guarded. For women it is both a right and an exclusive privilege, and is reflected in dress, space, architecture, and proxemic behavior.” (El Guindi 1999: 82)

El Guindi also makes a comparison of the Muslim face-veil to “*mashrabiyya*” (lattice woodwork screens and windows) in urban Arab architecture which serves to guard the family’s right to privacy. This connotes a right to see and not be seen, rather than the sense of seclusion or invisibility. But whereas the *mashrabiyya* is stationary, the veil is mobile and able to carry a woman’s privacy and sanctity into public spaces. Similarly, Bullock (2007) has argued that the *hijab* is not intended to stifle women, nor smother their femininity or sexuality, “rather, it regulates where and for whom one’s femininity and sexuality will be displayed and deployed” (Bullock 2007: 199).

The dichotomy of public and private has been argued to be grounded in Western European formations of society, and should not be imposed upon the Middle East (El Guindi 1999). For El Guindi, Arab culture “is nuanced and dynamic, so much as to accommodate privacy in public” (81). The western polarity between public and private is too rigid and static to accommodate Arab and Islamic senses of space, which are characterised by a daily interweaving of the sacred and the mundane. She cites the example of the Muslim prayer, which can be performed in any location, instantly rendering sacred an otherwise ordinary space. Sacred space switches freely between the public and the private, meaning the appearance of a woman in *niqab* on the street is a normal sight, symbolic of this rhythmic and sacredly entwined way of structuring society. Further references to veiling are also found within Islamic literature, detached from subordination or even gender. The ‘ultimate veil’, draped over the House of God in Mecca (the *Ka’ba*) is a recurrent theme in classical Islamic literature (Winter 2004), as is God’s Veil over Himself, which would otherwise burn the entirety of existence (*hadith, Ibn Majah*).<sup>31</sup>

The religious and spiritual reasons for wearing the face-veil or *hijab* - fundamentally, for the sake of a relationship with God - are generally overlooked in the media, yet clearly present in the answers of Muslim women in explaining their choice to veil (Bullock 2007, Zebiri 2008, Kariapper 2009). In an advanced secular society, ‘spiritual’ meanings of the veil appear

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<sup>31</sup> Hadith no: 195, narrated by Abu Musa in Sunnan Idris Majah  
<http://ahadith.co.uk/hadithbynarrator.php?n=Abu+Musa&bid=15&let=A>

directly in contrast with the dominant culture. This aspect doubles the “absurdity” of the veil insofar as it is both a covering (in a society that likes to reveal), and in that it has a spiritual notion in a culture where metaphysics does not inform public discourse. There is little wonder, then, why the veil’s scared meaning is far removed from the non-Muslim consciousness. Not being looked at or judged by commercial standards of beauty is another common reason offered by Muslim women as to why they feel more comfortable in *hijab* or *niqab*. This issue concerns the tradition of the ‘male gaze’ to which we will now turn.

### Ethics of Looking and the European Gaze

‘The gaze’ has long been established in European history predominantly as a masculine privilege associated with power, manipulation and desire (Olin 2003). Perception and vision are never passive, but political (Scheman 1993). This is particularly evident in art, where theorists of the male gaze have argued that the European tradition inherently frames the product observed from a masculine position of appreciation. Core examples consist of oil paintings and cinematic film, particularly their depiction of women. “Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” said John Berger (1972: 47), who, in line with feminist thinker Simone de Beauvoir, explains that women are culturally taught from an early age to survey how they appear, particularly to men, and to other women as well. Consequently, a woman becomes ‘a sight’; ‘an object to be looked at’. For Berger, this way of seeing women arose largely from European oil paintings of nude women throughout the medieval and renaissance periods. It is here that women were judged, usually by a male artist and spectator, embedding the aesthetic appreciation of women - especially nude women - into European culture. Early 16th century art had originally depicted the nakedness of Adam and Eve, though as the tradition of painting became more secular, more images of *nude* women appeared. The nude was different from the naked, which was simply without clothes. Alternatively, the nude was to be disrobed for the eyes of a male spectator, often displayed conscious of being watched.

Dissimilarly, naked or sex-themed art coming from pre-modern and non-European cultures did not single out women as sights on display. Like *Shunga* of late pre-modern Japan, artistic expressions of the sexual union depicted, and were consumed by, both men and women. The same can be said of sex-themed *Moche* pottery of ancient Peru. Sculptures from ancient

Greece also focused more on the muscular physiques of male gods, warriors and athletes, while Ancient Rome celebrated the male phallus. For Berger, the principal protagonist in European oil paintings of the nude was the spectator who is not painted, but intently watches, and is presumed to be male. Like the subject of the gaze today, it is his fantasies and expression of sexuality which take precedence, not that of the woman: “women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own.” Such an unequal dynamic is so embedded in our culture, argues Berger, that it still structures the consciousness of many men and women today, resulting in a reproduction of such dynamics through advertising, television, pornography and social media.

Berger’s thesis outlined above may have powerful implications towards the discourse on the Muslim veil in Europe. As Zebiri (2008: 205) has argued, the veil “subverts a long-standing tradition in Western culture which assigns to women the role of being looked at, of being evaluated and enjoyed visually, by men in particular but also by women”. The veil, in principle, removes or limits the extent to which a woman sees herself through the eyes of others, especially men, which disturbs the gaze and the right to look. This was particularly true in the case of European colonizers in Muslim lands who saw the veil of Muslim women as an exotic artifact, desiring to see what lay beneath (Vivian 1999). As part of the discourse within colonial expansion, the veil appeared to be not only a barrier preventing Muslim women from ‘reform’<sup>32</sup>, but also a no-go-area - a private world of unveiled Muslim women from which all western men were restricted. “Removal of the veil, therefore, marked the ultimate form of colonization” (Vivian, 1999: 122). Bullock (2007), too, argues that the veil as a gaze-inhibitor is one of the core reasons why it came under attack in the colonial era, adding that the frustration was exacerbated by the colonisers now being the subject of the gaze from women who could see them and not be seen. Such power dynamics within colonial history regarding the veil is said to continue to inform the desire to have power over Islam and to remove the veil in contemporary society (Vivian 1999, Bullock 2007, Alrasheed 2013).

Counter to the male gaze, in Islam, there is a clear ‘ethic of looking’ - a moral dimension which is almost alien to modern secular culture. “Look but don’t touch” is the maxim of the latter, signifying where the bounds of intrusion lie. In contrast, Bouhdiba (2012: 37) explains that “how to look and how to be looked at are the object of a precise, meticulous apprenticeship

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<sup>32</sup> This was particularly the case for French colonial experiences of Algerian women (Hopwood 1999)

that is an integral part of the socialization of the Muslim." "Lower your gaze" is a Qur'anic injunction to both men and women {24:30}, while the Prophet of Islam is believed to have said "the look is the arrow of satan" and "adultery of the eye is the look" (Bouhdiba 2012). Not only applicable to human beings - indeed, to stare even into the house of a stranger is a grave sin in Islam. Moreover, traditions from the Prophet teach that simply looking at the *Ka'ba*, or looking at one's own parents with love and mercy are acts of worship. Such ethical principles relate to El Guindi's (1999) ideas of interwoven sacred and temporal spaces, since worship and sins include where and how to place the eyes whether in public or private. For Bouhdiba, clothing is particularly relevant to this sacred dynamic, not only in differentiating the sexes - which is fundamentally intended by the religion - but also in assisting the eyes to remain within their sacred bounds. Clothing, thus, fulfils "a very precise function over and above their universal utilitarian one: that of transcending the biological towards the theological" (Bouhdiba 2012: 33) The ethics of looking in Islam further renders the face-veil in public areas a normal, and even expected, sight. Both the ethics of looking and the veil, together, form central tenants in resisting the principle of the European male gaze. Veiling thus becomes conceivably problematic in a society which not only lacks an ethic of looking, but privileges the freedom to look at others.

### Muslim Women's Voices

The gaze, as a tool within discourses of classical European art and within colonial history, assumes a silence upon the women being looked at. These silences communicate important information about asymmetrical power relations between groups of people (Vivian 1999). Despite recurring themes of women in Islam and Muslim women's dress in the UK media, the voices of Muslim women are usually omitted, allowing writers and thinkers to perpetuate narratives of the veil according to a power dynamic that is rooted in colonial hegemony. The acute focus on the veil itself often denies Muslim women the chance to be perceived detached from the veil. In her study of media representations of Muslim women after the London bombings, Fauzi Ahmad (2010) interviewed a group of Muslim women who challenge the media stereotype. She found that the women studied were unanimously unsatisfied with what they saw as the unrealistic vilification and "victim-focused" treatment when it comes to Muslim women. Their views, which challenge the established media-perception, continue to receive virtually no media attention, largely due to a restricted bounding of the debate which

focuses so much on women's dress. As Ahmad explains from the opinions of her interviewees, "in overprioritizing Muslim women's choice of attire, the media have failed to recognise Muslim women as achievers, contributors, or positive role models" (Ahmad 2010: 258). Other studies have shown that there has been an increase in Muslim women's involvement in the media as the veil debate has escalated (Hadj-Abou and Woodhead 2012). However, this presence has been largely reactive rather than proactive. Hadj-Abou and Woodhead's survey of key radio and TV producers in the UK showed that Muslim female speakers are more often invited to *take part* in news features, debates and so on, rather than actively initiate and engineer their own media presence. This reflects the sentiments of Muslim women in Ahmad's (2010) study, who felt that their presence in the media was not enough to counter the overwhelming volume of the victim-focused discourse in which Muslim women are spoken for and not spoken to. Evidence proves that if given a platform on their own terms, Muslim female expression would defy the uniform, subdued representation common in popular media. Opinion pieces from Muslim female bloggers, for example, challenge stereotypes found elsewhere on the internet (Bunt 2009). A recent study also examined the way in which Muslim women see themselves and the world around them by looking~ at self-designed photographs and various profiles published online. The conclusion held that this self-representation of Muslim women was "strikingly different from the ubiquitous paradigm of the de-contextualised, submissive women used as illustrations and metaphors in anti-Islamic discourses" (Piela 2010: 102). Unsurprisingly, the self-portraits displayed a variety of multilayered and complex religious identity narratives ranging from powerful, direct, and serious, to funny, poetic and subversive - totally contradicting prejudiced representations.

## Data & Discussion

Five online articles were examined looking at contemporary perceptions of the veil within the British public: three from the *Huffington Post*, one from the *Guardian* and one from the *Mail Online*. To save repeatedly going over the same themes for all three news sites, the main focus of the following analysis will be on the *Huffington Post*, which will be supplemented by notable and different themes from the *Guardian* and *Mail Online*. Cross-news site comparisons will also be made where possible. The comments will appear copied and pasted as they are, since correcting what may appear to be spelling or grammatical mistakes might actually interfere with intended stylistic preferences of online communication.

## The Huffington Post

Three Muslim veil-related articles were examined from the *Huffington Post*. The first article, "[\*Sheikh Abdullah Daoud, Saudi Arabian Cleric Issues Fatwa Calling For Female Babies To Wear Burkas\*](#)" was about a ruling from a Saudi sheikh who announced that baby girls should be veiled in order to stop them from being sexually molested. The controversial prescription of the veil here was responded to with strong hostility from both British non-Muslims and self-identified Muslims. The second article, "[\*UK Unlikely To Ban Burqa After Belgium And France, Says Key Muslim Organisation\*](#)" regarded the UK's stance of not following the *burqa* ban established in other European countries. This piece yielded the most comments and was far more neutral in content, allowing commenters to offer their opinions to the ban in general, rather than react to sensationalist journalism. The third, titled, "[\*Why I Hate the Burqa — And Yes, I Wear One\*](#)", was an opinion piece written by a Muslim woman who, although is supportive of wearing of the *burqa* in principle, was reasoning against wearing the *burqa* in the West due to the harassment that such women may bring upon themselves. Collectively, the articles were responded to with a range of opinions and sentiments expressed in around 1,500 comments.

It was very clear from the outset that the majority of the comments were negative in content, usually expressing condemnation of the veil. Significantly, the vast majority of online commenters were anonymous. Display names usually appeared unintelligible, or only used one name, or took the form of a name of something else other than a real name – perhaps personal to the individual (e.g. 'sioux01721', 'geedoch', and 'againstitall'). Display pictures were optional, and when used, were rarely in the form of a possible user. There was clearly effort made by users to obscure their real identity. In most cases, not even the gender of a user was known. This was only revealed by some comments which opened with a line such as, "*I am a white woman and I think...*". The online comments were divisible into various themes. In what follows, I will be discussing the themes that were most prominent.

## Symbolic subordination

The most commonly recurring type of comment found in these articles were from apparent non-Muslims who were explaining what the veil means in their own understanding, sometimes with striking confidence. Here are some examples:

*the Burqa is an evil symbol of oppression against women*

*Burqa is a prison and is equivalent to making women 2nd rate human beings. This must be banned.*

*Burkas are meant to de-emphasize the individual attributes of the wearer, and to transmit the message that the wearer is not a free agent but property, claimed by someone powerful and important. A man, of course.*

*A veil, niqab, or burqa, obscures a woman's face. This is deliberate and not just for modesty's sake. It is meant to cut women off from the larger world.*

*Do you know what the story of the veil in religion? It is a declaration of the low status of women.*

*This is a male dominated practice to control and dominate women.*

*The burqa and its slightly less offensive relatives are nothing more than a set of shackles meant to bind women to their misogynistic husbands and treat them like animals.*

*Ban that Burqa and Niqab, Its nothing but a black cloth prison forced upon women by a male dominated culture. Its nauseating.*

The identification of the veil with oppression, social imprisonment and low status is instantly clear. This perspective sits neatly within pre-modern discourses of orientalism and the Islamic Other, depicting the practices of Islam as strange, backward and oppressive (Said 1995, Richardson 2004, Poole 2002). From here, westerners are not only pointing out a problem within Muslim culture, but are given more reason to champion their own values and practices comparatively. The complaint from one user that the veil “*is meant to cut women off from the larger world*” mirrors exactly the sentiments of orientalist scholar and colonial administrator, William Muir, who claimed that “the veil removes the female sex from its just position and influence in the world” (Bennett 1998: 113). There is little to no sense of allowing the Muslim woman to dictate what the veil means to her. A meaning is stubbornly and, often, offensively, imposed upon her without the humility of seeking to understand the other culture. Commenters thus echo the role of the corporate institutions in the time of colonial history and their dealing with the orient by ‘making statements about it’ and ‘authoring views about it’ (Said 1995). The perpetuation of such views repeated in the media normalises this understanding of the veil. The only other (non-oppressive) purpose for the



veil acknowledged by users was that it could be used to protect the skin from sand storms. But this was a small minority of comments in comparison, hardly visible in context. For the most part, the veil - by definition - was equal to oppression. However, like Baker et al (2013) had also found, discouragement or outright abhorrence for the veil was justified in different ways.

Some commenters who voiced their support of a ban clearly perceived such a prohibition as doing Muslim women a great service, and that people in Britain should not tolerate intolerance. The underlying principle referred to was one of liberty and freedom; in a free society, we must ban that which is oppressive, so every citizen can enjoy freedom and equality. One user expressed: *"In the future most people, probably none more than Muslim women, will be grateful that there were those who had the strength to stand up for what is right and ban this shameful act of barbarism and oppression."* This, again, echoes a colonial mindset of 'civilising' Muslim people, as well as a kind of 'triumphant' tone attached to the struggle for women's rights in the West. The veil is seen to aggravate the non-Muslim insofar as it represents a betrayal of this social victory (Roald 2001). The assumption here was almost always that women were forced to wear the veil against their will:

*I dnt agree with the burka because I feel women are FORCED to wear this.*

*We should ban the burqa and rejoice - never again will we see Muslim women forced to wear veils against their will!*

*I think it is the HUSBANDS of these women who should be fined for putting them in such throwback costumes!*

The assumed compulsion to veil further emphasises the lack of Muslim female agency. Baker et al (2013) had also found that the word 'forced' tended to be associated with Muslim women veiling in his sample of British papers, demonstrating that commenters reflect the sentiments of a wider population. In this sample of comments, there were one or two exceptions to the male-imposed manner in which the 'forcing' was assumed. The following comment implied that the oppression might be self-inflicted: *"Women ... since I am one ... stop oppressing yourselves, let the wind blow your hair, come out of hiding so we can greet each other on the street. Be free."* In the vast majority of cases, the assumption seemed to be that women were forced to wear the veil possibly by a male husband or relative. However, for these commenters, even when self-imposed, veiling was seen as an act of self-oppression rather than freedom of choice.

The removal of the veil as an act of liberation has been questioned by academics who point out that white feminists fail to realize that labeling the veil as 'oppressive' only parallels abusive-patriarchy and denies Muslim women's agency (Hoodfar 1992). In general, however, the association of the veil with oppression is deeply embedded in the veil-discourse in the West (Admed 1992, El Guindi 1999, Scott 2007). It therefore comes as no surprise that it has been one of the most prominently appearing themes in this current study. As Fadwa El Guindi points out:

"Western-ideology feminists (in the East and West) have dominated the discourse on the veil, viewing it as an aspect of patriarchies and a sign of women's backwardness, subordination, and oppression. This uni-dimensional approach narrows the study of the veil to single-context analysis and leads to a distorted view of a complex cultural phenomenon" (El Guindi 1999: 3).

Hoodfar (1992) importantly notes the stubbornness of this association, in that, despite ample examples to the contrary, there is an "unwillingness... to let go of old colonial images of passive Muslim Women" (Hoodfar 1992: 5). In contrast, studies have actually shown that many veiled women have expressed more liberating and empowering associations to their choice of attire. These vary from the avoidance of being sexually judged and objectified by others, freeing oneself from consumerism, fashion trends and commercial standards of beauty, as well as directing their manner of interaction with males beyond flirtation and chit-chat (Zebiri 2008: 207). In general, veiling in the West has been understood by Muslim women as a means through which they maintain a healthy control of their lives (Ajrouch 2007, Bullock 2007). Such positive reasons feature prominently in the views of veiled Muslim women, but have not featured at all in user-comments. This shows the extent to which public opinion is dominated by the long-standing anti-Islamic discourse.

### [Our civility vs. your backwardness](#)

It was also clear that the disdain for the *burqa*/veil was being justified from a number of key social frameworks. The rhetoric of speaking of 'these people' was often deployed referring to them as "*a backwards people*", "*a backward race*" and a "*very sick race of people*". These specific comments were in response to the article about a Saudi cleric calling for babies to be veiled to protect them from molestation – a verdict which Muslim commenters also condemned. Nevertheless, remarks were still generalized towards Arabs/Muslims and Islam.

The references here are typical to racist discourses in which an entire people are associated with deviance and abhorrent practices (van Dijk 1991). Only a very few comments out of some 450 for this piece sought to establish the ruling as an isolated opinion, not reflective of the people, 'race' or religion in general:

*You can't condemn a whole race (which race, btw?) because of the infantile rantings of one mentally challenged individual and those who agree with him.*

*it is one persons view, a stupid view, but gives all these lot excuse for islam bashing/ muslim bashing, jimmy savile paedo, shall we go as far as saying all english are child molesters, No we dont, so leave it out, Seriously*

In context of the dominating negativity, such comments had minimal presence and no apparent weight of influence.

The veil was seen as a symbol for a backward culture and wearing it was seen as a “*very un-British thing to do*”. The clothing style itself was referred to as “*archaic*”, “*a Stone Age relict*”, and as having “*no place in the civilized world*”. Another commenter could only see a place for the veil a “*tribal indigenous culture*.” Moreover, it was claimed: “*Every western country needs to ban the burqa*”. Therefore, there was a clear sense of western countries being a place of ‘our’ civility and progress, compared with backward Muslim lands whose archaic attire was not welcome. This continues a longstanding attribute of anti-Muslim discourse, in which Muslim culture is seen as temporarily distant and lagging behind western culture (Said 1997, Samman 2012). The framework of ‘our civility, your backwardness’, was also maintained throughout the commenters’ assertions that such people can do what they want in their own country, but must obey *our* customs when in *our* country. This sentiment - distinct from biological racism - is identified as a form of cultural racism, “which evokes cultural differences from an alleged British, ‘civilised’ norm to vilify, marginalise or demand cultural assimilation” (Meer and Modood 2012: 39).

There was also evidence of a prevalent assumption that Muslims who wore the veil must be foreigners who moved from a Muslim country to the UK. This is clear from comments telling Muslims to ‘go back’ to their country if they cannot to adapt to western clothing. Similarly, other commenters pointed to the absurdity of such people’s migration choices.

*When in Rome.dress as the Romans.... and if you don't want to.....go where you can dress the way you want to.....back to the repressive middle east.*

*I have a great idea. Why don't all Muslims just get the hell out of Western countries (where you are not wanted), and go back to Muslim countries? Or would that prevent your plan for the Islamization of Europe and America?*

*If you insist on wearing it then why did you come here*

*Stop inflicting your religious culture on the west.. if you want to wear it, fine wear it, but don't come to the West and then tell us WE are intolerant because our customs include being able to see someone's face .....*

*common sense would dictate that when you move somewhere, that you learn the language and conform (at least to some degree) with the prevailing culture.*

*don't move to a nation where that is the customary dress; stay in your own country!*

*Isn't the reason for someone from a different culture moving to a Western country is to enjoy our freedoms and hope for a better life? In doing so you must respect the country's culture you intend to live in.*

This is perhaps one of the most surprising discoveries of this chapter – the assumption that veiled Muslim women must be foreigners who moved to the UK. There was no acknowledgement that some of these women may actually be English converts, or of the fact that the majority of them might be British-born. The cultural distaste deployed here seemed fixed in a 70s/80s racial discourse, which followed the mass immigration of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Caribbean men and women to the UK in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. For that time, the ‘go back to your own country’ type-racism was more befitting, given the number of immigrants who had recently moved to the UK. But for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond, such rebukes seem somewhat outdated. These results would suggest, as some have argued, that Islamophobic rhetoric is associated with Anti-Asian, Anti-Black, anti-Arab racism in Britain (Grosfoguel 2012). Scott (2007) similarly argues that within the French context, the veil is understood in racist terms rooted in its colonial history, whether it connotes the denial of sexuality, submission, or political opposition. The UK’s less extreme stance in not banning the face-veil can be argued to represent a less antagonistic attitude in government, but these comments certainly represent a parallel with racist tendencies amongst some of the UK public.

It is also important to note the perceived threat of the “Islamization” of the western world, which has become part of the anti-Islamic sentiment of the modern globalized world (Bowen 2012, Zúquete 2008). Regarding the veil, one commenter warns: “*make no mistake when they attain majority status, they will enforce this on all women.*” In the same vein, a “Creeping Sharia” discourse has developed, notoriously online, defined by one blogger as “*the slow*,”

*deliberate, and methodical advance of Islamic law (sharia) in non-Muslim countries*".<sup>33</sup> Evidence is pulled from a variety of social phenomena, from alleged exponentially rising Muslim demographics, to the fact that an increasing number of Subway outlets are turning *halal*. The Islamic threat is said to be a problem both domestically and overseas, heightening the tension to an international scale. The implication is almost war-like, in that Muslims are perceived to have an 'agenda' to 'take over' non-Muslim lands, by 'infiltrating' western society, uprooting its liberal values, and inaugurating Sharia law.

### Allegedly rational justifications

Commenters in support of the *burqa*-ban gave a variety of rational justifications. Aside from the most common justification (security), reasons for banning the veil included the need to see facial expressions for communication, as well as the alleged health risks caused by a lack of vitamin D due to having the skin constantly shielded from the sun. One commenter gave a socially comprehensive reason for the ban in the following words, and simultaneously criticized the claim that women *choose* the veil – a theme explored below.

*Can a woman drive a car with a tent over her head? Can she pilot a plane? Can she perform surgery? Be a nurse, or a teacher, or a librarian? Cook - or eat - in a restaurant? Dance? Sing? Act? Plead a case in court? Work in a factory? Work on a farm? Be a policewoman, or a firefighter? Serve in the military? Become a commercial fisherman? A politician? An astronaut? A white-water rafting instructor? A park ranger? The only hatred and intolerance here are on the part of those who define women as being "less than fully human" and force them to wear sacks over their heads so that they will remain dependent on the males who own them... Men saying women want to wear burqas is like slaveowners saying some people want to be slaves.*

Such social, occupational, and health-related justifications against the face-veil were also discovered by Baker et al's (2013) study of British newspapers in both article content and in its letters from readers. The rational justifications are significant since they reflect the sensitivities of a culture that highly values empirical-reasoning. This is a fundamental quality of modernity (Benson & Dawson 1997). Even in the case of two commenters who ascribed positive meanings to the veil, rational reasons were used:

*It was a Bedouin tradition for protection against sand storms worn by both genders...*

*if the cloth is not see-through then it can even prevent your skin from being damaged by harmful uv rays and thus acquiring skin cancer. with more open areas in many parts of the middle east , i can see the*

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<sup>33</sup> Creeping Sharia: <https://creepingsharia.wordpress.com/about-2/>

*rationale for the adaptation of covering your skin with cloth. also, sand tends to abrade your skin and nasal passages. even men in these areas cover their heads and faces with cloth.*

Whether positive or negative, all understandings of the veil by commenters were rigidly bound to materialism and empiricism. There was no acknowledgment of any religious or spiritual meaning ascribed to the veil, which are typically espoused by veiled Muslim women (Bullock 2007, Zebiri 2008, Kariapper 2009). Such purposes of wearing the veil would be classified as irrational or non-scientific within the cultural framework of modernity, and therefore not be given the same weight of appreciation. Indeed, this is true for all religious beliefs, justifications for which are difficult to sustain in a social context that highly values scientific understanding. Reasons for wearing the veil that are linked to overarching theological narratives only further subject veiling to an abundance of critical scrutiny. Understanding the Muslim veil thus becomes difficult – if not impossible – given the modern secular paradigm from which it is perceived.

### Security and fear

Besides identifying the veil with oppression, the most common reason for banning the face-veil expressed by commenters was ‘security’.

*All 'face coverings' whether they be 'Burkas' or 'Ski masks' should be banned in public places, being able to recognise someone, especially if that 'someone' commits a crime, is essential and should override religious concerns.*

*Covering the entire face is a safety risk and that is what is banned.*

*everyone is entitled to see your face as a matter of safety.*

*We identify people with their face and faces should be clear so we can identify a person in the advent they perpetrate a crime or a crime is perpetrated upon them.*

*it's really about identification in public. We all carry photo ID, but it's meaningless if you're wearing a burka*

*Ban the Burqa! All persons should be required to show their face to authorities for identification purposes.*

*Unfortunately it can also serve as a disguise for terrorists that can't be penetrated, on religious grounds, once it's been established as customary. Get rid of it.*

Such arguments appeared to give legitimacy to the desire to ban the veil, irrespective of religion. The reasons were clearly expressed as being ‘for the good of society’, while racist or explicitly anti-Muslim attitudes were avoided insofar as commenters focused on covering the

face in principle, and not as a practice in association with Islam. This was further confirmed by numerous commenters who made the comparison of not being allowed to enter a bank while wearing a mask.

Baker et al (2013) had carried out a random sample of 100 instances where an argument against the veil would be given across all British newspapers studied from 1998-2009. Concurring with this study, they had found that 'oppression of women' was the most commonly cited reason. Slightly at odds with my finding, however was their discovery that 'threat to security' was ranked 7th, while 'makes community relations difficult' was second. The latter did not appear very prominently in these comments, while security risk was one of the most prominent. The difference in findings is likely to do with timing. A small and random sample among papers ending in 2009, with a hugely concentrated explosion of arguments against the veil in 2006, would likely mean that a substantial number of arguments from their sample probably came from this period, echoing Jack Straws grievances. Hence, the high ranking of 'makes community relations difficult'. Dissimilarly, the selection of papers here, ranging from 2011-2013, render Straw's comments older and thus less prominent. Furthermore, by more recent times, there has been more reporting of people wearing the *niqab* committing crimes such as assault and robbery, for example, making security more of a critical issue.

The security risk was also very often coupled with a strong sense of fear, as if the veil was somehow associated with terror, horror, and criminal activity. This consolidated and gave emotional charge to the demand that the veil should be banned in the name of public safety:

*Oh god. They are so scary and disgusting, I don't care which side of the political fence you are on.*

*I hope Every Country in the World bans them! I'm Very Suspicious of anyone or thing and that includes "Super Heroes" and Clowns that cover their faces! I'm Not paranoid, but I want to See the Persons face and if it's covered they Hiding something! Therefore, I'm Very wary of them!*

*My feelings about face covering is the same as civilians carrying guns. I hate it and dont want to be in the same store with them.*

*Quite a few years ago I was in London and bent down to pick up something off a bottom shelf in a grocery store. When I stood up, standing before me was someone wearing a completely covering black garment. I let out a scream that could be heard all over the store! She was with a man who was very casually dressed. When it was explained to me I was astonished that anyone would wear such a garment. They still "scare" me..*

*For me, black cloaks, hiding persons are associated with criminality. Not a rational reaction, but, nevertheless one that I happen to have.*

These sentiments of fear and criminality limit the chance of contact between non-Muslims and a women who wear the face-veil, which might otherwise reduce prejudiced attitudes (Allport 1954). There was a strong sense that a *burqa* could be hiding *anything*. “*It certainly can hide weapons and bombbelts*”, one commenter explained. There was an apparent sense of caution towards anyone whose face could not be seen, and such attire was only ever interpreted in a negative sense. An interesting contrast presents itself as the veiled woman is constructed as helplessly oppressed, but at the same time, yields a hidden ‘power’ to attack and frighten ordinary members of the public. Paradoxically, she is submissively repressed but threatening at the same time.

In some respects, the irrational fear of the veiled woman can be compared to the irrational fear of black young males throughout the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fear of the “black mugger” was argued by the likes of Paul Gilroy (1987) to be a largely socially constructed phenomenon, which negatively influenced public attitudes of young black men. Both black males and south Asian Muslim males are no stranger to being portrayed as a threat to society in the media. The rise of the veiled-women in headlines, however, signifies the rare occasion where a group of *females* are considered as some kind of danger to the public. This breaks from the general representation in the British press in which Muslim men are generally perceived as aggressive/threatening and Muslim women are seen as being oppressed/victimised (Baker et al 2013).

It is also clear from the comments that some members of the public are genuinely ‘spooked’ by women in *niqab*. This type of fear is distinct from the fear of hooded male youths, for example, and more reminiscent of fictitious characters in scary movies. Fully veiled bodies here seem analogous to ghosts in white sheets, or masked murderers, whose concealed identity poses a mysterious yet potentially horrific threat. Baker et al (2013) also discovered a ‘discourse of horror’ regarding the veil particularly from conservative newspapers, which, for example, referred to women in *niqab* as dressing ‘like bats’ and as ‘shroud-swishing zombies’. The latter construction is particularly impactful seeing as zombies have no agency, and conjures up images of horrific ugliness and infectious, violent attacks (Baker et al 2013: 11). The perception of the *niqab* being “scary” has also been fuelled by the association between the image of the *niqab* with murder and crime-oriented news. Fauzia Ahmad cites examples:



"[T]wo separate criminal suspects attempted to escape police in 2005 using *burqas* as a disguise. The *Sun*, reported the news of PC Sharon Beshenivsky's murder with a picture of a woman wearing a *niqab* and asked in the caption underneath "*Veil... is this a Muslim woman or a ruthless gunman?*"... Images that consolidated criminal linkages between Muslim women and the *niqab* became commonplace. These included photos of the wives of two of the 7/7 bombers" (Ahmad 2010: 256).

A minority of commenters seemed reluctant to call for a ban in the name of security, but felt that the current climate of high crime and global terror demanded it. These more nuanced approaches from members of the public were interesting in that they expressed their otherwise approval for faith-based attire but felt that it was a 'luxury' that a high security risk society could no longer afford.

*I would have argued in favor of esoteric religious garb before terrorism became such a widespread threat. Now that it is, I strongly believe there is no further place for such dress. We don't have the luxury of religious customs that mask identity anymore. That is a thing of the past. Safety takes precedence over religious garb. Want to wear a burqa? Fine. Wear it. Stay home and don't leave there. In public, we need to know who people are, for the general good of all.*

*Sadly there are too many evil people doing terrible things in the world today (terrorist) to allow people to conceal their identity (wear masks) in public. If terrorism weren't an issue this wouldn't be an issue.*

*I respect everyone regardless of race and faith, but security is the key in here. The world has change it's becoming a dangerous place to live in.*

What is significant about the alleged security risk of the veil is its relative newness to reporting on Islam and Muslims in the media. In Elizabeth Poole's study throughout the late 90s, the idea that the *niqab* posed a security threat was significantly lacking, and prior to the 90s, it was non-existent in the media altogether (Knott 1984).

### Freedom to choose?

After comments that equated the veil with oppression, the most common theme put across by users was that a woman should be free to choose to wear whatever she pleases. The arguments echoed principles of both liberalism and liberal feminism, emphasizing that the government had no place dictating what a woman should or should not wear:

*This is an issue of basic human freedoms. The state has no business telling people what they can wear over their face. If someone wants to wear a burqua, for whatever reason and if you believe in liberty then you should just shut your pie hole and get on with your own life. There are far too many busy-bodies trying to legislate and control people's lives.*

*I strongly oppose the burqa ban simply because I think no one, not the government nor the husband has a right to dictate the dress of a woman*

*in a f-r-e-e country one should, theoretically be allowed to wear whatever they want to, or even nothing at all.*

*By the government not allowing people to choose on their own they are stripping the power away from the women, not empowering them at all*

*the idea of creating a brave new world where everyone is told how think, believe and dress by government is not something i can support.*

*This is a law about punishing women who dress differently. As a person who supports freedom of expression, it's a disgusting law, generally supported by anti-Islamic bigots.*

*With this ban, European counties are proving themselves to be just as backward and intolerant as the muslim theocracies they condemn.*

*\*\*\*"Muslim women who choose to wear the garment that covers their face and body will be fined €137.50 (£120) and spend up to seven days behind bars."\*\*\* So, they are proposing to liberate women by imprisoning them? I suppose the irony is completely lost on them.*

In Baker et al's (2013) study of British papers, the term "right to wear" was also commonly connected to Muslim veiling, along with "forced to wear" making the veil either as a right or an imposition two of the most common ways in which the veil is discussed in modern press. Many users in this current sample seemed genuinely perplexed by the concept of a clothing ban in a free country. Some identified such a policy as targeting Muslims, while others took it as a general attack on civil liberties. In this context, the wearing of the veil was defended as a principle of "free expression/choice", and not so much as a religious right. This suggests that such arguments come more from a place of secular liberalism, rather than an empathy with the traditions of a religious minority. Furthermore, some of the comments directed against the French stance may be partly charged by the historic antagonistic relationship that Britain has had with France. Britain have always at least seen themselves as different and as apart from Europeans and may be quick to criticize the mainland European practices when prompted. As one user commented: *"Belgium, one more country that you can't think of a single good thing about. Now they can add crass religious bigotry to their ignoble history."*

This issue was also more debated than comments deeming that the veil = oppression, which was rarely challenged. On the issue of freedom of choice, liberal commenters argued between the right of a woman to choose what to wear on one hand, and the need for a liberal state to ban oppressive, sexist clothing on the other:

*How does wearing a garment voluntarily oppress anybody?... I'm against a law that punishes people for dressing differently.*

*(reply) I'm in favor of a law that prevents women from being oppressed or from wearing an advertisement for male oppression.*

*If, on the other hand, she wears a veil from her own free choice, then what business is it of ours, or the governments? You can't force people to embrace freedom from religion - it can only ever be an option.*

*(reply) It's a law that supports the right of women not to be oppressed.*

*Typical of Western World and the people in it to preach to Saudi Arabia, Iran, places all across the world about how they treat women and how they restrict women's freedom of choice, and yet this comments thread is full of people who now want to subject these women to oppression, except because it's British, or French, or Belgium doing the oppressing it's all fine./The comments here demanding the Burqa be banned are simple paranoia. If Islam or Judaism started to preach to us what we could and couldn't wear there'd be uproar about attacks on our civil liberties, yet it's fine for us to be the preachers?/Being a liberal voice in the crowd seems to be a growing impossibility amongst HuffPo.*

*(reply) I'm a liberal and I'm all for laws that prevent the oppression of women, and yes, that includes a ban on identity-concealing garments. What you are is a sub-category of liberal: a misguided liberal.*

Thus, opposing voices were not seen as being *true* liberals from either side. On several occasions, a comparison to a nun's habit was made to highlight a possible double standard, to which someone would almost always reply with "this is about covering the face." The liberal tension here echoes a classical paradox in political theory regarding the extent of tolerance. Karl Popper (1966) had argued that absolute tolerance necessarily leads to the disappearance of tolerance insofar as it would amount to the allowing of intolerant philosophies to dominate others by force and without reason. Such irrational philosophies and their adherents are then to be met with force from the otherwise tolerant society, lest chaos and harm should ensue and 'tolerance' should lose all meaning. In other words, it marks "the right not to tolerate the intolerant" (Popper 1966: 544). All liberal democracies value this principle of tolerance to some degree. The precise point at which tolerance generates intolerance, however, is contentiously subjective.

Although the pro-choice commenters were seeking to protect the rights of women who choose to wear the veil – and this appeared largely in contrast to those who deemed the veil oppressive and called for its ban – it wasn't entirely obvious that the liberal commenters *didn't* also find the veil oppressive. Despite the strong identification of the veil with oppression (the most common theme), supporters of freedom of choice seemed less concerned with what the veil means. Their argument was simply to advocate free choice, regardless of whether one's choices are absurd, stupid, or foreign. If such resisters of the ban

did have any negative sentiments towards the veil, such feelings were marginalized by the complete condemnation of a government that tells women what to wear.

When espousing the freedom to wear the veil, the point of emphasis for commenters was almost always on 'choice' (often appearing in capital letters). Despite the lack of comments arguing that the veil was not oppressive, the pro-choice emphasis could be understood to imply that such liberals, in fact, did not see it as oppressive. The point here being that if she chooses to do something, then it cannot be considered oppressive since no one is forcing it upon her. But this line of thought is challenged by acknowledging that such liberals would also defend the right of a person to smoke and drink heavily, despite relevant health problems. The principle may well be that if a person chooses to 'oppress' or damage himself or herself in any way without coercion, they should be free to do so. Therefore, that the veil is a symbol of oppression might have still been an underlying assumption from either side of the argument.

### *Choosing to self-oppress?*

The validity of the nature of a woman's choice to cover the face was often challenged. To what extent is she really covering out of her own choice? For some of these critics, the fact that a woman would claim to wear the veil of her own free will was not plausible enough. One person had expressed that such women had been "*trained like dogs to wear these... which goes to prove that most people don't know what's good for them.*" This again echoes the sentiment of civilising the ignorant Muslim subjects of colonial Europe (Said 1995, Ahmed 1992). Another user described such women as being "*brainwashed*" to wear them from childhood, again expressing the lack of agency attributed to women in *niqab* (Baker et al 2013). Other commenters doubted the validity of 'choice' in that it was an ingrained cultural practice, and that women would face harsh reprisals if they chose not to wear it. Here, the argument becomes complicated as it calls into question the extent to which any of our choices are in fact entirely ours. This was actually brought up by another commenter who compared it to the choice of a woman to wear high heels: does she purely choose this or do popular conceptions of beauty/fashion influence these choices? It is not within the scope of this investigation to look into a matter rightly placed within cultural psychology, but if the reverse accusations are also true (that some women in the West dress a certain way due to social pressures or

customs), then the western attack against the a Muslim woman's choice of dress may suffer from a degree of hypocrisy.

Caught in between opposing views, a few liberals acknowledged both sides of the argument:

*I have extremely mixed feelings on this one. I tend to believe that the government has no business banning burqas outright, but it does not seem unreasonable to require one's face to be shown in some government buildings for security reasons.*

*I hate to see people jailed for practicing their religion--but I also hate religion because I think it stifles women's lives (men's too). At the same time it comes off as intolerant to punish people for what they wear. I can't help my ambiguity--this liberal does nuance.*

The 'nuanced' or 'conflicted' camp, however, was a small minority compared the to majority of commenters who clearly held to either side of the debate. In terms of proportions, it was evident that the majority of commenters were in favor of a ban. Having said that, this was by no means a vastly dominating result. As mentioned above, 'freedom to choose' was the second most frequent theme to appear, thus producing a representation of opinions quite in line with the 67% (pro-ban) 2010 YouGov *Burqa*-ban survey. The results here also closely reflect those of Baker et al's (2013: 219) study, which states that "the general position of the British press towards veiling is ambivalent and conflicted" but certainly skewed towards negativity. However, Baker et al (2013) seem to ascribe a larger portion of the British public to 'ambivalence' than appears to be the case in this current study where people are arguing strongly from clear stances. This may be due to a methodological difference in that Baker et al (2013) were looking at published article content, not user comments, which are usually written by those who have already formed an opinion.

### **The Guardian**

Around 800 comments were written in response to an article, titled, "[\*If Britain decides to ban the Burqa I might just start wearing one\*](#)", written by actor and comedian David Mitchell, who, despite describing the burqa as 'daft', argued strongly against the ban:<sup>34</sup> "As long as people aren't wearing crotchless jeans outside primary schools or deely boppers with attached sparklers on petrol station forecourts, we've all got the right to wear exactly what the hell we like and I can barely believe that we're having this debate." On the whole, responses

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<sup>34</sup> This is not the first time a British comedian has argued against the *burqa*-ban in the media. Frank Skinner had also addressed the issue in *The Times* in June 2009 saying "I'm not sure that the burqa is objectively wrong. Some Muslim women clearly feel oppressed by it, but then some clearly don't. To ban it is to remove women's choice, using oppression to combat oppression" (Baker et al 2013: 218).

could broadly be placed in very similar categories to that of the *Huffington Post*. However, it was instantly clear that *Guardian* readers showed more interest in the nuances of the debate, raising very specific questions and providing fuller arguments and longer comments. This sensitivity to a wider scope of concerns made the comments harder to categorise. There was also more evidence that commenters had considered either side of the debate more seriously than *Huffington Post* readers. For instance, it was not uncommon for readers to speak of a “limited-ban” under which laws would be enforced for the covering of the face in specific contexts:

*To those people who are against a burqa ban - would you support a limited ban? For example: [1] Make it illegal to wear the burqa in certain professions (ie. doctor, teacher, police) [2] Ban the burqa in sensitive security areas (ie. airports) [3] Allow employers to dismiss staff who decide to wear the burqa (ie secretary)*

This more nuanced or balanced representation of the veil was also found by Baker et al (2013) to appear in *Guardian* newspapers and its sunday equivalent, the *Observer*. Yet they also found that there was a line drawn at *tolerating* the veil, with explicit resistance to *respect* it, thus maintaining the negativity of the discourse. In the comments of this sample, the view that the *burqa* amounts to oppression was again very common, with users confidently dictating what the veil means:

*The Burqua is not just an item of clothing, it means something; it is a reminder to women - a reminder that they must inhabit - that they are worth less than, and are subject to the authority of, men.*

*It's very simple. Jealous and overprotective men have made their wives, daughters and sisters cover themselves. This has exacerbated men's desire for overtly sexually inappropriate reactions to a hint of a woman's form within such communities. That in turn drives women to keep wearing the niqab or burqa to stave off the depraved actions of men*

However, it was not so clear that ‘burqa = oppression’ comments outnumbered statements arguing that people should be free to wear they want. The higher ratio of pro-choice comments could simply be due to the fact that the *Guardian* is a more liberal-leaning news source. More likely, however, the increase in pro-choice comments was more due to the content of the article, which used humour to promote the freedom to choose, and by the fact that David Mitchell is a popular public figure. Such factors (which weren’t the case for any of the *Huffington Post* articles) may have prompted users to agree with the article – particularly those who, previously, were undecided on the issue. For instance, one commenter posted: “Really, really good article. I couldn't form an opinion on this issue, and luckily I can now just use David's, as it is the opinion I WOULD have formed if I were cleverer and less muddle-headed.”

This indicates that the argument of the article – if reasoned well - can indeed tip the weight of perspectives. Such ‘dissenting voices’ from writers do indeed challenge mainstream narratives of racism or anti-Muslim sentiment, and - as seen here - can influence the opinion of readers. However as van Dijk (1991) argues, this is not enough to overthrow the overriding hegemonic structure. On the contrary, it may strengthen it insofar as they offer the illusion of anti-discriminatory views, making the overriding structure less questionable (van Dijk 1991). More optimistically, it can be argued that changing the minds of a few individuals is still valuable.

The British satire-humoured style of the article yielded a number of comments which were also playful and witty, sometimes detracting from the issue. Thus, the manner in which the topic was addressed sometimes affected the way in which it was discussed. When debates took place, users appeared keener to outsmart one another with fuller arguments, often with a touch of sarcasm. Importantly, those who did argue pro-choice were again arguing from a point of secular liberalism; implying, like with the *Huffington Post* users, that no other meaning was attached to the veil apart from oppression or, in this case, daftness.

It was difficult to gauge the extent to which hostile comments towards the *burqa* were directed solely at the Muslim veil or whether it had merely been swept into a pre-existing hostility towards Islam in general. If the latter were true, the already present hostility towards Islam would be acting as a drive to ignite further negativity towards the face-veil insofar as it was associated with Islam. In fact, some liberal commenters challenged the more anti-*burqa* users on these grounds:

*People need to stop banging on about the right to be able to see who's beneath the burqa. Let's just be honest, those who are for the banning simply just don't like the concept of Islam. Geert Wilders stated that Islam is the new Fascism or Nazism and that it needs to be stopped. So in the eyes of those who are for the ban there need be no justification as to why it needs to be banned.*

*No one cared about Islamic dress before 2001. The campaign is part of their blood libel against Muslims. You really begin to see how Nazi Germany unfolded, lots of sheep wilfully swallowing the propaganda.*

*People have frequently hidden their faces with dark-glasses, veils, hats and all manner of things. Because no one ever complained before the current furore looks a little like racism. Of course, the racists will defend their position with all the kinds of red-herring arguments posted above and by saying that they carry public opinion. But then racists have always said those things.*

These 'dissenting voices' (van Dijk 1991) seem to imply that the moral condemnation of the *burqa* is a socially constructed phenomenon, which did not exist previous to the rise of anti-Islamic sentiment in recent years (Poole 2002, Knott 2013). This reflects the ability of these individuals to resist both specific elements and dominant themes of anti-Islamic discourse – a trait that did not surface as prominently with *Huffington Post* commenters.

### Substantial contact with women and girls in *niqab*

Intergroup contact theory suggests that direct contact between groups can assist in dissolving negative relations (Allport 1954, Stephan et al 2000, Croucher et al 2014). This has been shown by researchers in Europe demonstrating that non-Muslims under considerable contact with Muslims, convey reduced prejudice attitudes (Savelkoul et al 2011, Novotny and Polonsky 2011). Furthermore, Elizabeth Poole (2002) had conducted her own focus group with non-Muslims in the UK regarding their impressions of Islam and had distinguished between those who had had significant contact with Muslims and those who had not. She had found that non-Muslims audiences in contact with Muslims tended to show a desire to learn about and be sensitive to other cultures, paving the way for more positive and favourable relations (Poole 2002: 259). The following post is from a *Guardian* reader responding to an anti-burqa commenter. It is a lengthy comment, but important since she is the first non-Muslim commenter to openly declare to have had substantial interaction with women in *niqab*:

*I don't know how this fits with your view of things, because I understand your point and until I started working in a college with a large Muslim student base, and a small but significant proportion of the girls choosing to wear the niqab, I would have held a similar point of view. The thing is, now I'm used to seeing them, and I look at the way they interact with their fellow students, they're just like any other teenagers. Wearing the niqab hasn't stunted them emotionally, and they don't just interact with other veiled students. They laugh and joke and shout and throw tantrums and enjoy life, just like their cohorts. Perhaps it shows me up for my preconceptions and ignorance, but I was initially surprised at how normal they are.*

*I'm also about to graduate from London South Bank University, a university with a very high proportion of mature students (like me) and students from ethnic minorities. There were quite a few students there who chose to wear the niqab. Amazingly enough, they were pretty normal too. It has taken a while as a white Western woman to get to grips with dealing with women who wear the veil because obviously, visual cues that we're used to are missing, but I'm used to it now. The amazing thing is how easy it becomes to recognise someone even when completely veiled. You just pick up different cues based on gait and body language.*

*I suspect the difference here is that these girls are all allowed to interact and to be a part of wider society, and although they use dress as a mark of cultural identity, they're still integrated. On the other hand, there are plenty of young hijabis who might not look as 'alien' or 'separate' to western eyes but are subject to strict religious and cultural controls. There's a lot more to this than whether or not a woman covers her face - many who don't don the niqab still don't enjoy the freedoms we would hope they could. Is the concern about women being oppressed? If that's the case, what they wear is secondary to how they're treated. If it's about us feeling intimidated by something that makes us uncomfortable, well, whose problem is that really?*



This comment supports the principle that intergroup contact assists positive relations (Allport 1954). In this case, a non-Muslim, under the conditions of her professional environments was made to have personal contact with Muslim women in *niqab*, consequently *changing* her perceptions. This also supports the idea that the ‘problem’, or ‘oppressive’ quality of the veil is a socially constructed phenomenon, dependent on a ‘virtual’ understanding of the veil. The proximity of contact appeared to close the gap between ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’ social identity, which minimized the effect and influence of stigmatization (Goffman 1963). The veil being, in essence, a ‘symbolic’ as opposed to a ‘realistic’ threat (Stephan and Stephan 2000), meant that the perception of threat was dissolved upon substantial contact.

A number of other relevant key points are mentioned by the commenter here demonstrating how once the perception of threat is dissolved, other arguments against the veil also break down. First, contrary to many of the other commenters, this user mentions how a lack of facial expressions is in fact, not a communication problem, and that gait and body language was a means of easily identifying fully veiled women. Second, she dismisses the assumption that such women are unhappy or different to women who are not perceived as oppressed by citing the normal, everyday emotions they experience, being fully able to ‘enjoy life’. The commenter’s experience with women in *niqab* in both her role working in a college and as a mature student in a university affirms that her newfound positive perception was not based on a single isolated experience. Her remarks about the integration of these fully-veiled women in public institutions explicitly oppose those of Jack Straw demonstrating that there is nothing innately separating about the face-veil. She also undermines the assumption that showing the face is more liberating than covering it by pointing out how the reality of women in *hijab* may well be more oppressive than that of a woman in *niqab*. Finally, she reverses the cause of the problem back towards “us” (non-Muslims) highlighting that treatment of such women should be the primary indicator of whether or not they are oppressed, not choice of attire. Subjective feelings of discomfort about the latter should not warrant accusations of oppression.

Overall, other than having more comments which were not relevant to the *burqa*-ban (discussing Mitchell’s grammar, for example) the main differences found in the *Guardian* comments where that readers seemed to be more pro-choice than those of the *Huffington*

Post, and that they seemed more sensitive to the nuances of the debate and offered fuller arguments. There was also evidence to suggest that contact may dispel threats by allowing for a fuller and more positive assessment of veiled Muslim women, albeit, this came from one commenter. Still, sharing such views on a public comment section does have the ability to change perspectives of other readers (Lee and Jang 2010, Yang 2008).

### Mail Online

The article from the *Mail Online*, titled “[Muslim juror who refused to take veil off is ordered to stand down by judge because he wouldn't be able to see her facial expressions](#)” regarded a Muslim lady’s refusal to remove her face-veil in court after being summoned for jury service. She was subsequently asked to stand down by the judge of the court while another individual took her place. The article also noted the condemning words of the chairman of the Islamic Human Rights Commission, Massoud Shadjareh, who found the ruling “totally unacceptable.” This article was useful because it gives a practical example of the veil being a social nuisance in the UK rather than discussing the ban in and of itself. The article was responded to with over 800 comments.

The most frequently recurring comment was praise for the judge’s decision. This was often followed up with a number of supporting reasons which typically included (i) knowing who was actually under the veil from one day to the next, (ii) the judge needing to see the reactions of the jury when evidence is presented, and (iii) ensuring that the jury were paying attention, as opposed to listening to their mp3 players, for example. Many of the commenters also spoke of the ‘right’ of the accused to see the faces of those who would be responsible for their verdict. Many of these were expressed from the first person:

*If I was an accused I would want to see the faces of the jury*

*the accused has the right to see who is judging them and no one should be able to cover their faces in a court room.*

*If I was the accused I would tell my counsel to object to a juror who had their face covered!*

*The Judge was correct, if I god forbid was in the dock I would want to see the face of my jurors*

*Surely the accused has the fundamnetal right to see the faces of those who will pass judgement on him?*

*The ACCUSED is entitled to face those judging him, not have them hide behind masks like cowards.*

The praise for the judge was also expressed as a great sigh of relief, in that someone ‘finally’ ‘stood up’ for British values and law.

*At last a touch of common sense, let's hope it spreads.*

*Well done the judge, very respectful and did not back down!*

*It's about time that the law made a stand! Good on the judge.*

*Finally this man has shown backbone*

*Well Done that man, finally someone who has the balls to stand up for what he believes in, instead of being ground down on a daily basis by the PC rubbish*

These comments reflect a well-established sentiment among British non-Muslims who feel that for too long Britain has compromised its values and norms for the sake of foreign communities. This sentiment is clear from the following comments:

*No other country has appeased ethnic minorities like Britain and the result is a dysfunctional, resentful society who feel betrayed and marginalised.*

*For too long people have been afraid to speak their mind, this country has had positive discrimination at it's forefront for too long and look where it's got us.*

*Since this is the UK, and people have never covered their faces, it is quite right that the Judge made this decision. Let us hope that we will cease to pander to the imposition of alien cultural practices in our Country.*

*We have to stop being so PC and bending over backwards, especially if this special treatment would not apply to the rest of the population.*

*It's about time we stopped making exceptions for ANY religions*

*Every time a follower of this religion does something like this they are challenging out laws with a view to undermining them. The campaign to have their communities ruled by the ancient out of time Sharia laws it is time it was stamped on.*

An exacerbated sense of frustration accompanying anti-Muslim sentiment here might be explained by Allport's (1954) theory which states that different groups would get on favourably so long as - among other conditions - there was equal status between those groups. If such conditions are contradicted, it could lead to more hostile relations. Here, we see that the British non-Muslim public see that Muslims are, somehow, exceptional to the normal laws of the land creating greater barriers of difference and antagonism.

## This is England

After praise for the judge, the most commonly recurring comment related to the idea that ‘when in our land, people should follow our laws and customs’. Croucher (2013) had also previously demonstrated that when a dominant culture feels threatened by a minority group, they are more likely to believe that the minority group are not trying to adapt. These comments were comprised of the same points of the same theme in the *Huffington Post* article, however, given the tangible example of the case in point, people were less neutral and expressed how ‘sick’ they were of Britain having to accommodate for foreign communities who are trying to impose their values:

*I am getting more annoyed every day at the way we are bending over backwards to appease the muslim community ,this is ENGLAND dont forget it we have our Queen and our government to make OUR laws and people who come to this country or live here must abide by the laws and institutions of our country*

*I am utterly sick of these types who put their religion before our laws*

*Well done Judge - we are a British country and our laws are British. We abide by our laws and if the Judge thought wearing the veil might prejudice the case, he has every right to ask the lady to stand down.*

*This is England and we want to see who we're talking to.*

*In their own Country that's fine but I'm sick of hearing how we should bow down to them & their religion in our Country.*

*I'm SO SICK of hearing about Muslim leaders' outrage. I DON'T CARE. I AM OUTRAGED. Follow OUR rules or go away.*

*Living in OUR country they obey our laws, as we would in theirs, if they will not do this why are they here? It's about time we started laying down the law, we are a tolerant country but that tolerance is wearing very very thin.*

*This is Britain , not an Islamic state , you may want to hear your clothing for your functions , special occassions, BUT when you are on a court room you need to abide by the custom of the land.Which means no face covering.*

Again there was much evidence to suggest that the woman in *niqab* who attended the courtroom (or women like her) must be foreigners who moved from another country. The ‘us and them’ binary is clear, emphasising the freedom and privileges for the self, and negatively perceiving the other (van Dijk 1998). Also conveyed was the idea that a ‘foreigner’ should be grateful that they are even allowed to sit in jury service or to be present in the UK enjoying its freedoms, in comparison to being in their own county:

*Would a foreigner in her country be allowed to even sit, let alone wear western clothing, as a juror there? I doubt it very much.*

*Why on earth do we tolerate this hostility to our nation's codes of conduct etc from cultures that have no intention of respecting them? There should be a citizen's test before such people are allowed in our country.*

*they should obey and cherish this country for allowing them to be here in the first place*

*If you want to wear stuff like that go back to your own country... Don't come over here and then complain! If a westerner were to go to the middle east and complain about how things were run they would probably be shot or something*

Many commenters took their discontent further, demanding that the woman '*should have been done for contempt of court!*'. In this respect, some claimed that the judge's decision was too lenient and that she should have been fined and/or temporarily imprisoned. Other commenters joked about wearing the *niqab* as a means to evade jury service.

Many commenters also made analogies to justify their condemnation of the women in *niqab* offering various examples of inappropriate 'attire' to wear in a courtroom such as crash helmets, balaclavas, ninja masks, ski masks, and fake glasses with nose and wig. The reasoning typically pointed out was that if one cannot wear these items in court, then a woman should not be allowed to cover her face. The examples lack acknowledgement of the veil being a religious practice, since the likened examples are all irreligious items. No comments were seen to defend the *niqab* in this way. In fact, there were numerous comments, which emphasized that the *niqab* was '*not a religious requirement*', even from self-confessed Muslim commenters. Therefore, the fact that the woman's attire was perceived to be by *choice* and not religious obligation, seemed to further aggravate many readers. A handful of commenters who 'defended' the woman in *niqab* by asking "*what does her face have to do with listening to a case?*" were instantly met with criticism and an abundance of red arrows.

### Muslim commenters

The interaction of Muslim readers on the *Mail Online* was particularly interesting. One would have imagined that due to the strong negativity towards the Muslim community in many comments, reactions against Muslim commenters would also be negative. But here it seems that the message content spoke louder than a person's religious identity. Muslim commenters appeared to generally agree with the judge's decision, citing similar reasons to non-Muslims and even expressed the same amount of anger at the incident. On occasion, the commenter would first state their position - which conformed to the condemning spirit of the general community - and then only later add as a closing statement: "...And I say this as a British

Muslim.” Whether intentional or not, this order of disclosure would succeed, quite effectively, in minimizing prejudice which could otherwise have blinded readers from acknowledging the actual point being made. Such comments are also able to break negative generalisations about ‘Muslims’, perceiving them as a monolithic identity. Here is an example:

*This woman is 100% WRONG in her stance on this issue. Whilst there is freedom to wear what you want in this country, the issue here relates to the practicalities of the situation - in the same way that you cannot wear a helmet or other item of clothing that hides facial features if you walk into a bank. I cannot agree with the woman's reasoning to wear a veil in court and it will only further inflame tensions. In this day and age, we need less of that right now from BOTH sides. The judge was right to remove her from court. And I say this as a British Muslim.*

As mentioned earlier, unlike the *Huffington Post* or the *Guardian*, the *Mail Online* offers the additional option on its comment interface to ‘rate’ a comment with a green or red arrow for likes or dislikes, and also offers an option to view the comments in terms of ‘best’ and ‘worst’ rated. Out of 835 comments for this article, the comment above was rated fourth best. This may also be considered as a point of positive intergroup ‘contact’, (Allport 1954) insofar as people are reading, rating, and responding to one another’s comments favourably. Indeed, contact theory has more recently acknowledged that not all groups are able to meet face-to-face and are incorporating less conventional forms of contact which also demonstrate a positive effect on intergroup relations (Everett 2013).

Another Muslim commenter anticipated negativity due to her religious identity, but still made her point, again agreeing with the judge’s decision. She is commended for it with positive ratings and a short supportive response from another user. Both comments were positively rated.

*Good! I'm a Muslim women who wears a normal head scarf (Gets red arrows from haters) but I believe in our justice system, even if it is stupid some times, but the Judge was absolutely right to ask her to take it off/dismiss her! To other Muslims, a message from one of your own, you live in Britain.You can have the balance of religion with respect for the Island you live on! - Mia, Cardiff, 19/3/2012 22:04.....  
I don't know why you would expect to get red arrowed for such a sensible statement. Well said Mia.*

The way in which these Muslim commenters are received by the *Mail Online* community, (the vast majority of which, we can assume are non-Muslim) may reveal an important detail in the tension between Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain. These examples would indicate that it is not being a Muslim in an of itself that is problematic, rather, it is certain values that may be espoused by certain Muslims, and quite likely, the way in which they are espoused that is problematic. For it would seem that Muslims who hold values and opinions that concur with the ‘British’ in general, (as the case here with support for the judge’s opinion), are regarded favorably.

## Conclusion

In analyzing the present data, it is not only important to look at what has been stated by commenters (content), but also to understand how the actual medium creates a paradigm in which such comments are generated. This regards “medium theory” and how a particular medium will have psychic and social consequences for its audience (McLuhan 1964). News material in general has evolved in its growing tendency to expose both the “frontstage” and “backstage” of social, and political action, which has led the public to be far more skeptical, reflexive and self-conscious about certain matters than they were in the past (Hoover 2006). This may also go some length to explain why so many of the public display such confidence and self-perceived authority in dictating what the veil means. This kind of reflexivity and critical questioning in all matters is institutionalized in a society of secular rationalism. Individualism strengthens the validity of personal opinion, while appreciation for collective and especially religious commitments decline. There is, therefore, less trust in the narrative of external authorities in general to narrate what the veil means, and even less when it comes from a religious culture. In a sense, then, the media - as a secular medium - may amplify xenophobic tendencies, validating and consolidating one's own prejudices. This is made more acute by the particular style of commenting, averaging just a couple of sentences, which constrains the user's expression and almost forces them to make quick conclusions on an issue which would otherwise require far more exploration and study. The anonymity of such messages also exaggerates the boldness of such statements made by commenters who need not be accountable for their words.

As is clear from the results, the primary meanings attached to the face-veil were oppression and subordination, amounting to one of the most pertinent of symbolic threats of Muslim presence on the UK (Stephan and Stephan 2000). Even liberals who opposed the *burqa*-ban made no significant effort to oppose this definition, arguing purely from a pro-choice opinion. Such an association represents a very specific understanding of the veil, particular to a relative and modern context. Veiled Muslim women in the UK have themselves attached far more positive meanings to the wearing of the veil but these narratives are drowned out by overarching anti-Islamic discourses. From the perspective of postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard (1994), we could say that the veil has entered the realm of a hyperreality. That is, the veil's more authentic meaning – as espoused by proponents of the culture and religion to

which it is attached – is denied and replaced by a superficial reading of the veil. Within the hyperreality or “simulacrum” the media then has the role of maintaining the illusionary narrative of the veil, while overtly representing it as an actuality for our consumption.

That so much negativity is stirred up by the veil shows its significant status as a symbolic threat. The negativity of comments appeared to be consistent with the default negative representation in the British press regarding the Muslim veil in general (Baker et al 2013). This demonstrates the structural component of the discourse, as well as its tendency to be reproduced both by other media outlets on the macro scale and by users on the micro scale (van Dijk 1991). Even though article content was not the focus of this study, it was still apparent that the articles imposed a specific way to think about the veil, primarily reducing it to a strange, foreign, backward and legally questionable item. Reporting of the article about the Saudi sheikh can also be seen to be deliberate, perpetuating negative stereotypes, maintaining a system of group dominance (van Dijk 1991).

Within user comments, there was a consistent theme of “banning the *burqa*” even when the article did not specifically relate to a ban. This would suggest that the discourse of the “*burqa* ban” is prevalent within the mindset of UK and western readers in general. This represents a bottom-up social cognition within the reproduction of discourse (van Dijk 1991). The ‘mental models’ of users are already affected by the prevailing hegemonic narrative in which the subject of the Muslim face-veil is reduced to a question of banning. It also highlights the notable ability of politicians - as was the case with Jack Straw - to socially construct contentious issues in the minds of the public, and have them effectively reproduced by journalists and readers.

More positively, there were signs that, upon having substantial contact with fully veiled women, such Muslims could be fully humanised, even by someone who previously held negative views towards the Muslim veil. It was also shown that being a Muslim in and of itself is not necessarily problematic to readers. The problem is more to do with certain practices, espoused values, and being made to feel that Muslims need not abide by the same laws. Furthermore, the way in which the issue of the veil was talked about and by whom may positively affect public reactions. This suggests a need for more important and popular people to make more positive statements about Islam and the veil to dispel negative perceptions.



It is clear that the veil's meaning is still fundamentally rooted in attitudes of colonial history defined by discourses of Muslim female oppression. At the same time, the discourse can shift reflecting the modern socio-political climate of the times. Nevertheless, these changes remain within a framework of negativity, such as the rise of the perception that the face-veil is a security threat in recent years. There is hope for better relations and attitudes through independent writers that challenge the negative narrative and also through greater intergroup contact, but such improvements are made more difficult as the media continues to reproduce an entrenched narrative.

## Chapter 5: Homosexuality

The issue of sexuality in Islam has been an important target of criticism against the religion since the earliest European perspectives (Daniel 1966, Hopwood 1999). From the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Christian writers and travellers understood Islam as sanctioning the fulfilment of lusts, which they perceived as being detrimental to the spirit and contrary to natural law. Some have even gone as far to say that the general western view of Islam has been one in which the entirety of Muslim beliefs and practices are commonly reduced to an assessment of the male-female dynamic (Lyons 2012). Ronald Hyam had claimed, for example, that ‘sexual dynamics crucially underpinned the whole operation of British empire and Victorian expansion.’<sup>35</sup> Classically, this was epitomized in the notion of the harem, concubinage, and polygamy (Daniel 1966, Vitkus 1999, Hopwood 1999, Lyons 2012). However, it was not until the latter half of 19<sup>th</sup> century - as European colonial powers established themselves in Muslim countries - that such views were more fully developed and centralised into anti-Islamic discourse. This was driven by a combination of factors, which principally included a colonial narrative of Muslim cultural inferiority compared to European culture, and the instrumental application of feminist language to the colonial discourse regarding Islam (Ahmed 1992). Massad (2007) further argues that the western gay movement has followed in the footsteps of international feminism seeking to impose and promote anglo-centric ideas of sexuality to non-western societies.<sup>36</sup> Hopwood (1999) makes an important distinction between actual relations taking place at an individual level, and attitude, myths and prejudices held at a more general level. The latter are shared, consciously or unconsciously and often propagated in print. It is with these more general impressions that this chapter shall be concerned.

The framework within which such reproaches were deployed held Christian marital and sexual values as the benchmark from which all morality was measured. Early Christian writers therefore equated sexual indulgence with moral indecency. A 9<sup>th</sup> century Córdoba abbot, for example, reacting to Muslim presence in Spain, accuses the Muslim vision of paradise - where both sexes indulge freely in their desires - as being “not paradise but a brothel, a most obscene place” (Hoyland 1997: 229). This early interaction between Muslims and Christians in Spain was where many later ideas about Islam being charged of lust and

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<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Hopwood (1999), p.2

<sup>36</sup> Ironically, for Massad, this movement has been much to the detriment of same-sex practitioners in non-western countries.

violence took root (Daniel 1993). In particular, the Prophet Muhammad's marriage life, which - according to nearly all classical western biographers and commentators - was filled with sensuality and sexually scandalous incidents, was an evidential basis for lax sexual license (Hopwood 1999). Latin Christians of the Middle Ages had perceived marriage as strictly monogamous and permanent to the extent that divorce and remarriage of other traditions was seen as legalized adultery (Daniel 1993). In the 16th and 17th centuries, wealthy Arabs, Moors, and Turks were thought to have private lives of hidden "sin", while "their houses and palaces were described as locations for unbridled sensuality, exotic eroticism, lust, and lechery" (Vitkus 1999: 222). Often such views were presented as if they were practiced universally amongst all Muslims. Excess sexual indulgence was the assumption, even if hidden behind the Muslim veil and harem walls. This was a moral attack linked to the wider Early Modern perceptions of Middle Eastern and African cultures being innately more promiscuous (Said 1995, Vitkus 1999).

Victorian womanhood and its mores - based on a certain understanding of Christianity - were eventually to become the gold standard of female civilisation. This marked a narrowing of the relatively open attitudes towards sexuality of the 18th century, and helped justify the domination and eradication of Muslim cultures both politically and morally in the 19th century (Ahmed 1992, Hopwood 1999). This was also ideologically supplemented with Victorianism's link to social Darwinism (Massad 2007). Comparisons between the state of women in Christianity and Islam typically followed, surfacing in various publications, adopting the rhetoric of feminism and cultural superiority. In his foundational work, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1894), Austro-German psychiatrist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, expressed that "Christianity gave the most powerful impulse to the moral elevation of the sexual relations by raising women to social equity with man" (Krafft-Ebing 1894: 4). Comparatively, Krafft-Ebing claimed that "The Mohammedan woman has ever remained essentially a means of sensual gratification and procreation; while, on the other hand, the virtues and capabilities of the Christian woman, as housewife, educator of children, and equal companion of man, have been allowed to unfold in all their beauty. Islam, with its polygamy and harem-life, is glaringly contrasted with the monogamy and family life of the Christian world" (5). Similarly, Victorian writer on Islam, John J. Poole, in his *Studies in Mohammedanism* (1892), makes a stark comparison between the treatment of women in the two major faiths: "nowhere on earth will you find woman so degraded as in countries where

Islamism reigns supreme! A Mohammedan regards woman not as a companion and helpmeet for him, but as a plaything, a pretty toy, as soulless almost as his turban, his pipe, and his amber mouth-piece. How blessed is the contrast when we look at Christianity, and think of Christ, who revered women, who made them His friends, who chose them as His co-labourers, and who regarded them as heirs with men of the Kingdom of Heaven!" (Poole 1892: 412).

Such was the sentiment across Christendom of 19<sup>th</sup> Europe. In conjunction with the destitute status of women, the sexual values of Islam were seen as being catered highly towards the excessive desires of men, and against all moral decency. Early 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar of religions, Robert Adam, described the laws prescribed by the Prophet Muhammad as "too loose for the most compliant moralist to justify, and too favourable to afford the most abandoned sensualist any probable ground of complaint" (Adam 1818: 262). The perceived sexual laxity of Islam was even seen as means through which to attain conversions from Christianity (Daniel 1993). It was as if Victorian scholars could not see past the question of sexuality in the Muslim faith in judging the religion or the character of its prophet: "the retirements of Mohammed, from his first acquisition of power to his last decline of life, were continually disgraced by every excessive indulgence of that passion, which has a more particular tendency to degrade the dignity of the human character even below the brute creation" (Adam 1818: 261-262).

### [Accusing Muslims of Homosexuality](#)

A consequence of holding Christian values as the moral yardstick was to accuse the Muslim faith of opposing values, irrespective of whether or not they had an explicit basis in Islam. Thus, while Christian attitudes to sexuality centred upon the figures of Jesus, Mary, chastity and virginity, the Prophet Muhammad was perceived to be "the epitome of lechery, debauchery and sodomy, and a whole battery of assorted treacheries" (Said: 1995: 62). European thinkers from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century perceived homosexuality and the desire for anal-intercourse as a basic sexual deviance. Thomas Aquinas had grouped homosexual acts with masturbation and bestiality as "unnatural vices" contrary to reason and to the

natural order.<sup>37</sup> Namely, that men and women were created with reproductive organs intended exclusively for union with one another. This attitude fell within a long held sentiment regarding sexuality, which was that “every expression of it that does not correspond with the purpose of nature, - i.e., propagation, - must be regarded as perverse” (Krafft-Ebing 1894: 56). Given this condemnation of homosexuality and anal intercourse in Christian Europe until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the logical paradigm of ‘accusing our enemy of what we despise’ would dictate that the followers of Islam must be guilty of it. Indeed, sodomy in the pre-modern and Victorian period was seen as the Persian and Turkish vice (Hopwood 1999).

The condemnation of homosexuality was more acute in Christianity than in Islam, not only because Leviticus 20:13 explicitly condemns it, but due to the almost synonymous identification of sex with procreation. The idea of sex for pleasure in an on itself was not positively regarded. Thomas Aquinas conveys this in his *Summa Contra Gentiles* (III.122) when he says “every emission of semen, in such a way that generation cannot follow, is contrary to the good for man. And if this be done deliberately, it must be a sin.” In such a vision, the pleasure of sex is incidental to its necessary objective. Pedro de Alfonso, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish convert to Christianity from Judaism defended the Judeo-Christian emphasis on procreation in contrast to the Muslim faith, which was seen to inappropriately condone sex for the sake of pleasure itself (Daniel 1993). Christianity was also opposed to the notion of contraception up until the eighteenth century, having seen it as a defiance of God’s will as well as a form of homicide (Musallam 1983). In contrast, Muslim scholars had been historically consistent in sanctioning contraception under Islamic law (Musallam 1983), and the Prophet had clearly identified sex within marriage as a divine virtue irrespective of the intent to bear children (Murata 1992). Since male to male penetration was inherently devoid of a procreative quality, the Judeo-Christian tradition could easily justify their prohibition of homosexual acts as being against nature and as superfluous to the purpose of the sexual union. Islam, on the other hand, did not necessarily identify sex with procreation and thus the religion’s prohibition of homosexuality was not as obvious to many early Christian thinkers.

Norman Daniel (1993) surveys a number of early sources from the 12<sup>th</sup> century and shows that some writers claimed that the Prophet had introduced sodomy to his society – practicing

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<sup>37</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II:ii, 154. The Parts of Lust: <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/3154.htm> Aquinas had claimed that homosexuality was a lesser evil than bestiality since in the former at least the species was correct.

the act with both men and women, while others perceived the Qur'an as condoning homosexuality because its legislation did not condemn it clearly enough (Daniel 1993). Others read the Islamic holy book to be condoning anal penetration explicitly. Peter the Venerable, for example, 12th century French abbot and commissioner of a landmark translation project of Muslim texts, took this view on interpreting the Qur'anic verse {2:223}, which allows men to enter their wives "when or how you will". Peter had even received a letter from one of his translators in Spain, which affirmed that the verse did indeed encourage the "dishonourable" use of wives, "for it is really in the Qur'an and, as I have heard for certain in Spain... all the Muslims do this freely, as if by Muhammad's command" (Daniel 1993: 164). Sexual segregation and the harem led many European writers to believe that homosexuality and/or bisexuality was the norm amongst frustrated men and women (Hopwood 1999). This particularly included homosexual assumptions of men's Turkish baths (El Guindi 1999). Moreover, cross-dressing and the feminized-male culture that may have accompanied this phenomenon in the Muslim medieval period (Rowson 1991) was also a target for European writers against Islam. William of Adam, a 14<sup>th</sup> century French Bishop who travelled extensively in the Muslim world, had claimed that among the Muslims, "there are many effeminate men who shave their beard, paint their own face, put on women's dress, wear bracelets on the arms and feet... The Muslims, therefore, forgetful of human dignity, are shamelessly attracted to those effeminates, and live together with them as with us husband and wife live together publically" (Daniel 1993: 167). Echoing such a view in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Sherley had also reported in his *Discourse of the Turks* that "For their Sodommerye they use it soe publicly and impudentlye as an honest Christian would shame to companye his wyffe as they do with their buggeringe boys."<sup>38</sup> Such sentiments were pervasively common amongst French and English travellers to the Middle East (Hopwood 1999).

Accusing Islam of sanctioning homosexuality was another important way in which European Christianity would distance itself from the Muslim religion. In the modern context, the same distance is sought with the reverse accusation, namely, that Muslim countries deny rights to homosexuals. Indeed, the construction of the hetero-homo binary had great influence on how sexuality is perceived worldwide (Massad 2007)<sup>39</sup>. For Susan Schibanoff (1993), this

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<sup>38</sup> Cited in Hopwood (1999), p.175

<sup>39</sup> For Joseph Massad, this extends to a Eurocentric destroying of existing notions of sexuality that do not fit a hetero-homo binary.

cemented with the “myth of Western heterosexuality”. Schibanoff argues that there was a paradigm shift that took place in the high Middle Ages where the older classical ideal of same-sex love and friendship was replaced by a highly emphasised heterosexual passion. As the notion of heterosexuality developed, so did homophobia and the condemnation of homosexuality (Boswell 1980). Thus, “In effect, Europe invented two ‘others’ at the same time; the Muslim and the homosexual” (Schibanoff 1993: 29). The acute negativization of “the homosexual” both morally and clinically in the western world created what would become homophobia - “one of the most enduring and damaging legacies of Western imperialism” (Amer 2012: 393). As a result, perspectives on same-sex sexuality in Muslim lands also changed with colonisation and the ‘import’ of western ideas about homosexuality (Massad 2007). Importantly, homosexuality in Muslim lands began to be labelled as a ‘perversion’ which was a Christian moral position, having no precedent in Arab-Islamic history (Hopwood 1999). This view of sexuality was worked into the colonial narrative of inferior otherisation, and is argued to continue today with the universal imposition of anglo-centric ideas of sexuality and the promotion of gay-rights discourses worldwide (Massad 2007). This modern process of cultural inferiorization is assisted by some Arab/Muslim elite and intelligentsia (or ‘assimilationists’) who adopt such discourses and attempt to extend them to the rest of Arab-Muslim society (Massad 2007).

### [Framing Homosexuality in the West and in Islam](#)

It is difficult to discuss the issue of homosexuality as it is understood today in the context of early or medieval Muslim society without being anachronistic (Ahmed 1992, Massad 2007, Amer 2012). This is due to the fact that conceptual frameworks relevant to modern and postmodern society are very different from those of pre-modern Arabia. As such, not all concepts and ideas can be translated and applied across time and geographical locations. Classifications of sexual orientations themselves are a recent, western way of structuring sexuality (Phillips & Reay 2002). So too is the exclusive emphasis on the *gender* of the desired partner in defining one’s sexual “identity”. An anecdote from the 10th century Arab-erotic work, *Encyclopedia of Pleasure*, informs us that same-sex relations were sometimes driven by more pragmatic reasons than those of sexual “identity”: when a man was asked why he preferred slave boys to a bondmaid, he answered that “a boy slave could be a travelling companion, a convivialist, and a wife in solitude”, while another answered that a boy-slave

neither menstruated nor ovulated (Jarkas & Khawwam 1977: 17). Indeed, some classical Arabic literature and testimonies explained male and female homosexuality as a preference which avoided the scandal and burden of pregnancy (Musallam 1983). Chronicles of the Mamluk period (1250-1517) also mention that homosexuality was common among Mamluk men despite them being married and having large harems (Admed 1992), though such individuals were not known as, nor would it be fair to label them, “bisexual”. Same sex acts amongst women were also often about convenience, or a hatred towards men, rejecting anything that even reminded them of a penis, such as cucumbers, carrots, and the flute (Jarkas & Khawwam 1977). This understanding of sexuality was not exclusive to Muslim lands, but also complied with earlier ideas in the western world. Krafft-Ebing (1894), for example, wrote on “homo-sexual feeling as an acquired manifestation”, which he explains may result from various psychological and environmental factors. Indeed, contrary to current popular notions of static sexual orientations, researchers have continued to demonstrate that sexuality is more fluid and more susceptible to historical, cultural and social conditions than popular culture currently believes (Phillips & Reay 2002, Nagel 2003).

A fundamental distinction is the fact that traditional Muslim societies did not medically categorize homosexuality as a ‘species’ of people (Foucault 1978). This was a specifically western phenomenon tied into the mutual development of scientific and medical thinking in the 19th century. Of course, homosexual acts were known to take place as part of the lifestyle of certain Muslim ruling elite, and male desire of ‘beardless boys’ is well documented in medieval Muslim sexual literature (Murray & Roscoe 1997, El-Rouayheb 2005). However, a single label was never popularized and constructed as a ‘deviance’ in the same way. Surveying a number of sixteenth and seventeenth century medical texts from the Ottoman period and taking into consideration other discourses, such as erotic literature, Dror Ze'evi (2006: 39) states that “[p]assive” male intercourse” in other words the desire to be penetrated by another man, “was seen as weakness, perhaps, but not as a disease that needed treatment or punishment... it seems that the early Ottoman attitude to male “passive” intercourse was one of indifference. This was some people's preference, it was part of the spectrum of normal sexual behaviour, and it was not to be considered deviant in any way”. Since such people were not defined by such action or inclinations, this concurs with the reasonable observation that *liwat* (male-male sex), as identified in classical Islamic legal texts, cannot be equated with modern homosexuality, which had no linguistic equivalent (Zollner 2010). Sahar Amer (2009:



221) also tells us that “lesbians” were not at all hidden from medieval Arabic literature, and that “in contrast to their status in the medieval West in the same period... Arab lesbians were not considered guilty of a “silent sin,” and there is no clear evidence that their “crime” was punished by death.” *Ulema* (Muslim scholars) of the early modern period who condemned homosexual and pedestrian practices of some Sufi clerics were also very familiar in their condemnation. That is, their rebuking of such behaviour was not distinguished from any other practice falling outside the laws of Islam, such as heterosexual sex outside of marriage. It was not given especially abhorrent attention and perpetrators were not seen as having a psychotic illness or requiring treatment. They were merely seen as acting wrongly and abusing the power of their spiritual regard (Ze’evi 2006).

Given these distinctions, the question of whether or not one can ‘be gay’ and be Muslim is conceptually problematic, since it juxtaposes two very separate notions rooted in different schemas. As such, the question and its acknowledgment in society is not one that the Muslim faith has traditionally needed to address. As Kecia Ali explains: “The desire on the part of some self-identified gay and lesbian Muslims to have exclusive and publicly recognized same-sex relationships, and to do so in a way that falls within an “Islamic” framework, is without precedent in Muslim history” (Ali 2006: 78). Within the traditional Islamic ethical framework, two principles have helped to ensure that an attempt for such recognition has never historically surfaced. One is the Islamic imperative to keep your faults - as well as the faults of others - hidden. This has ensured that same-sex intimacy was not something that tended to be publicised. The other is the moral principle that it is better to sin, knowing it is a sin, than to try and justify it, claiming it is religiously acceptable (Ali 2006).

In western countries, the application of the label “homosexual” was said to be a form of social control in identifying deviance (McIntosh 1968). Some, then, self-adopted the term ‘homosexual’ from its clinical use which, in turn, helped create a clearly defined subculture to challenge mainstream hetero-normality. Since the sexual discourse in Muslim societies did not follow the same developments, its culture of same-sex relations has been markedly different. This has led thinkers like Sahar Amer (2012) to insist that “LGBTQIA” individuals from the Middle East should come up with their own way of defining their experiences and sentiments based on their own history, culture and language. Joseph Massad (2007) goes further to say that the labels of sexual orientation themselves are western imports, and are

inapplicable to non-western societies. The imposition of such labels and discourses on non-western lands is what “produces homosexuals, as well as gays and lesbians, where they did not exist, and represses same-sex desires and practices that refuse to be assimilated into its sexual epistemology” (Massad 2007: 163).<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, LGBT activists have adopted a “born this way” narrative, which is not only inapplicable to Islamic assumptions of sexuality, but is also an idea which parts from classical western approaches. Kraft-Ebbing (1894), for instance, held a more dynamic understanding of sexual inclinations and even believed that sexual ‘inversions’ could be reversed. This was therefore more inline with the ever emerging constructionist approach to sexuality in the 21st century. Joane Nagel (2003:48) for example, argues that sexual identities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight, butch, femme, promiscuous, celibate, monogamous, etc.

are negotiated between individuals and audiences, and these can recede or advance in social significance in different situations and throughout the life course. Individuals have portfolios of sexual identities some of which are more or less salient in various situations and vis-a-vis various audiences. As settings and spectators change, the socially defined array of sexual options open to us changes. Shifting definitions of sexual situations can produce a layering of individual and group sexual identities that may or may not resonate with socially recognized or available sexual categories.

Kraft-Ebbing mentions hundreds of what were considered deviant cases of sexuality from fetishes, masochism, beastility, and gender/age orientations. These appeared so frequently in people that they were, in a way, quite normal. Such accounts were sometimes expressed with great detail, using the words of the individuals themselves to describe their own circumstances, experiences and sentiments. Kraft-Ebbing also records how he ‘treated’ people for homosexuality - predominantly with hypnosis - and while still battling with occasional urges, many were able to marry from the opposite sex and live seemingly happy lives.

Perspectives that challenge the usefulness and ‘truth’ of sexual identity labels make a relatively minor appearance in the mainstream media.<sup>41</sup> Instead, ‘fixed orientations’ and ‘born with’ narratives and assumptions dominate the media and popular culture, despite the issue

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<sup>40</sup> A denial of the essential nature of sexual identity labels is not exclusive to the likes of Joseph Massad and other constructionists. Westerners who have same-sex attraction and engage in same sex acts have also, on occasion, refused categories of orientation. For example, American writer, Gore Vidal who engaged in much same-sex activity, argued that trying “to make categories is very American, very stupid, and very dangerous.” He saw this as a form of social control and preferred ancient attitudes like that of the Greeks, for example, who “didn’t make a fuss about it” and “never had a word for such orientations, since, Vidal argues, “the concepts didn’t exist”. <http://www.out.com/entertainment/art-books/2014/01/07/why-gore-vidal-refused-identify-gay>

<sup>41</sup> For example: Rouse, R. “Best of both worlds: They’re not straight and they’re not gay. Today’s sexually liberated lovers are simply looking for love wherever they find it. Rose Rouse reports on the pansexual revolution”, *The Guardian*, April 28 2002 <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2002/apr/28/features.magazine107>

being scientifically and clinically contentious.<sup>42</sup> Former president of the American Psychological Association (APA), Nicholas A. Cummings was part of the Council of Representatives that sponsored both the resolution that homosexuality should not be considered a mental disorder (1975), and that gays and lesbians should not be discriminated against in the workplace (1976). At the same time, however, Cummings also insists “contending that all same-sex attraction is immutable is a distortion of reality”.<sup>43</sup> He claims to have professionally seen hundreds of people with same-sex attraction, like Kraft-Ebbing, who had successfully shifted their sexual orientations.<sup>44</sup> While he feels gays and lesbians have the right to affirm their homosexuality, he also feels that people should not be stopped from seeking reorientation therapy should they wish to do so. Centres of reorientation therapy assert that everyone has the right to live a life according to their freely chosen beliefs and values, and it is not for anyone - activists or governments - to deny them that agency.<sup>45</sup> The quelling of such freedom is seen as part of the historically continuous process of establishment forces, here, alongside activists, who shape, structure and impose a specific discourse of sexuality onto society<sup>46</sup> (Foucault 1978).

In dealing with the issue of homosexuality and Islam in the modern age, then, Muslim scholars and academics have taken various approaches according to wider ideas of sexuality assumed. Typically, some preachers and authorities in the Middle East continue to crudely condemn and/or persecute all homosexuality as a punishable wrong, making no distinction between orientation and act (Whitaker 2006). Other popular mainstream Muslim scholars claim that there is no sin in the orientation, only in acting upon it. Such individuals are also usually quick to condemn homophobia. Others take a more progressive approach in trying to reinterpret

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<sup>42</sup> See 143 page ‘special report’ discussing over 200 peer-reviewed studies: Mayer, L.S and McHugh, P. R. (2016) “Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences” *The New Atlantis*, No. 50, Fall 2016 <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/number-50-fall-2016> Also, Knapton, S. “Homosexuality ‘may be triggered by environment after birth’” *The Telegraph*, Oct 8 2015 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/03/15/homosexuality-may-be-triggered-by-environment-after-birth/> and Yong, E. “No, Scientists Have Not Found the ‘Gay Gene’: The media is hyping a study that doesn’t do what it says it does,” *The Atlantic*, October 10 2015 <http://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2015/10/no-scientists-have-not-found-the-gay-gene/410059/>

<sup>43</sup> Cummings, N. “Sexual reorientation therapy not unethical” *USA Today* July 30 2013

<http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2013/07/30/sexual-reorientation-therapy-not-unethical-column/2601159/>

<sup>44</sup> Yet both conceded exceptions.

<sup>45</sup> For example, Narth Institute: The Clinical, Research and Medical Division of the Alliance for Therapeutic Choice <http://www.narth.com/>

<sup>46</sup> This is said to be done through various establishment practices ranging from withholding funds from research which may challenge the existing cultural narrative, to only accepting pro-gay activists onto official committees dealing with sexual orientation: <http://www.josephnicolosi.com/apa-task-force/> Proponents from this side of the argument claim that the current cultural narrative on homosexuality is political and ideological, not scientific. However, opposers continue to argue that sexual identities are immutable and that reorientation therapy is ineffective and harmful: <http://www.hrc.org/resources/the-lies-and-dangers-of-reparative-therapy>

fundamental teachings of Islam to accommodate same-sex relationships and marriages. For Scott Kugle (2010, 2014), the Islamic solution is the same as it is for any new social phenomenon not presented to the Prophet Muhammad: principles must be drawn from the tradition to guide Muslims on how to manage such relationships (Kugle 2014). This method, according to Kugle, sees an Islamic acceptance of homosexual relationships so long as they are based on principles of mutual trust, love, and commitment. For Kugle, Prophet Lot's story "does not address homosexuality as sexual orientation or homoerotic relationships as expressions of emotional commitment and care" (Kugle 2014: 31). Rather the classical story traditionally used to object to homosexual activity is interpreted as being to do with sexual violence, male-male rape, and the dishonouring of guests - a perspective which more classically trained scholars like Yasir Qadhi claim has no precedent in traditional Islamic scholarship.<sup>47</sup> Fundamentally, Kugle accepts modern paradigms of sexuality without problematising their nature or application: "A person attracted to those of the same gender is "homosexual." One who is attracted to both genders is "bisexual" and one who feels no attraction is "asexual"" (Kugle 2014: 15). Not only are these terms taken for granted, but he tends to make the relatively common misnomer, which is to "impose current categories onto past individuals"<sup>48</sup> (Phillips & Reay 2002: 3). Similarly, in *Islamic Homosexualities* (1997), Murray and Roscoe argue that pre-modern homosexuality has everything in common with how homosexuality is understood in modernity, and therefore deny the notion that the homosexual identity is a modern invention. They also seek to show how pre-modern practitioners of homosexual acts did indeed organize themselves clearly enough to be recognized as a group and as a subculture. Massad (2007) surveys a number of such works on the subject of homosexuality and Islam written for western audiences and calls authors out for identitarian essentialism, anachronistic universalism, and mistranslations of arabic terms. On Murray and Roscoe in particular, he claims there are too many language based errors to list, leading to inaccurate assumptions and conclusions.

The affirmation of current and predominant discourses of sexuality which insist on fixed 'identity' categories is the foundation on which much of the relevant contention is based. For the constructionists however, such labels are not essential realities of the human being, no

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<sup>47</sup> "LGBT issues in Modern Islam: Questions in Singapore ~ Dr. Yasir Qadhi": [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Tsf29m9\\_04](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Tsf29m9_04)  
 However, 11th century Islamic scholar of the Zahirī school, Ibn Hazam, had pointed out that Lot's people were not only punished for homosexual acts, but for disbelief as well (Adang 2003).

<sup>48</sup> Claiming that a 16th century Sufi saint from Lahore, India was 'gay', for example (Kugle 2007).

matter how deeply embedded or widely accepted they are in modern society. This is demonstrated by their inapplicability to other temporal and geographical spaces in which humans have existed (Phillips and Reay 2002, Nagel 2003, Massad 2007). Yet due to their consistent and especially commercial and institutional use, such terms almost become an unquestionable reality.

### Islam and Homosexuality in the Media

Recent news reports online covering Islam and homosexuality are saturated with stories of repression, violence, and conflict. News items found by a Google Alert with terms “Islam” and “homosexuality” from November 2014 to July 2016 bring up three predominant themes: First is the struggle and persecution of LGBT groups in Muslim countries. Typical examples include Saudi Arabia, Iran, Indonesia, Turkey, Egypt, and Gambia among others. Articles usually mention homosexuality being seen as illegal or as a capital offence in such countries and Muslim governments imposing “crackdowns” on LGBT presence, quelling pro-gay activism, and denying them their basic rights. Second and also prevalent is the reporting of ISIS killing homosexuals in Iraq and Syria. Executions carried out are brutal, such as by throwing victims off high buildings and stoning them to death thereafter if they survive ground impact. Despite ISIS not being a sound representation of Islamic teachings, comments on such articles often blame religion for such actions. The third most frequent topic is the coverage on Muslim preachers, *imams*, and leaders who hold negative or controversial views about homosexuality. Such speakers are usually represented as ‘preachers of hate’<sup>49</sup>, and are often reported as being banned, or should be banned, from speaking publicly (at a university, for example) due to their views. Slightly less common than these three themes are views from the other side of the polarised debate; namely, coverage of attitudes of pro-LGBT Muslims who promote an idea of Islam that is compatible with homosexuality. Such news stories often feature an ‘openly gay imam’, for example Daayiee Abdullah, Nur Warsame, Muhsin Hendricks, or Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, who express support of Muslim gay marriages, or feature South Africa’s “People’s Mosque” in which LGBT people and their marriages are welcome. Such initiatives are usually celebrated, seen as leading the forefront of ‘progressive Islam’ with still much work in the community to be done. Other news coverage on Islam and homosexuality tends to be more situational. For example, the reporting on a self-made documentary film, “A Sinner in Mecca”,

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<sup>49</sup> Knott et al (2013) had also identified ‘preachers of hate’ as a theme in domestic news reports on Muslims, particularly in tabloid papers.

diarising a gay Muslim's journey to the *Hajj*. Another focus was on Muslim bakers who refused to prepare wedding cakes for a gay marriages. Also less common are the reporting of gay Muslim asylum seekers in the West facing and fearing deportation, and opinion pieces from various Muslims on the subject of Islam and homosexuality, often highlighting Islam's more "liberal" openness to such relations in pre-modern societies. A notable example was one written by Maajid Nawaz for the *Daily Beast*, who blamed Victorian colonialism for institutionalising homophobia in Muslim lands.<sup>50</sup>

The vast majority of articles operated within a polarized, antagonistic framework. On the one side there are those who hold liberal, western, pro-LGBT values, who are constantly in conflict with the other side, made up of aggressive Muslims who condemn homosexuality with words and violence. Massad (2007) identifies this a new discourse in discussing sexuality which suppresses many voices that do not quite fall into either extreme. In looking over such articles, one would hardly assume that there are a large number of Muslim mainstream scholars, such as Hamza Yusuf, Yasir Qadhi, Abdul-Hakim Murad and Tariq Ramadan, who, while finding no way to permit same-sex activity within the religion, emphasise compassion and mercy for all human beings, particularly those who self-identify as non-heterosexual. Nor would one assume that there were in fact a silent but substantial number of Muslims who experience same-sex attraction but believe that homosexual acts are wrong and strive, like any other Muslim, to live a life according to mainstream Islamic teachings. A moderator for a Muslim group dealing with same sex desires, for example, expresses:

*I am a Muslim who has same-sex attraction and I am leading a happy and faithful life. I struggle to control my actions and strive to be a better person every day on my path towards God. I do not change religion to accommodate my desires but rather I keep my desires in check in order to follow my religion.*<sup>51</sup>

Such Muslim voices are virtually unheard of in the media, which insists to frame the debate in a clashing binary between accepting liberals on one side, and offensive or antagonistic

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<sup>50</sup> "Why Does Gay Sex Scare Modern Muslims? It Didn't in the Golden Age." *Daily Beast* April 13 2016 <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/04/13/why-does-gay-sex-scare-modern-muslims-it-didn-t-in-the-golden-age.html>

<sup>51</sup> Comments section of Vaid, M. "Can Islam Accommodate Homosexual Acts? Quranic Revisionism and the Case of Scott Kugle", *Muslim Matters*, July 11 2016 [http://muslimmatters.org/2016/07/11/can-islam-accommodate-homosexual-acts-quranic-revisionism-and-the-case-of-scott-kugle/#\\_edn1](http://muslimmatters.org/2016/07/11/can-islam-accommodate-homosexual-acts-quranic-revisionism-and-the-case-of-scott-kugle/#_edn1)

Muslims on the other (Massad 2007). However this voice is slowly being raised in the Muslim community.<sup>52</sup>

Baker et al (2013) had carried out a search on terms relating to sexuality, orientation and gender in British papers from 1998 to 2009 and found that there was a general discussion of such themes from 1998 to 2000, followed by considerable silence on such matters between 2001 and 2005, and then found such themes emerging again from 2006 onwards. Baker et al (2013) explain the middle period of silence by the fact that *terrorism* became the dominant theme in the reporting of Islam after 9/11, generally pushing sexuality and gender related issues into the background. Also taken into account by Baker et al (2013) is the legal and political change in the status of homosexuals over the course of this period, which included the repeal of the 1988 Local Government Act forbidding the 'promotion of homosexuality' by local education authorities in 2000; the permitting of homosexuals into the armed forces in the same year, and the legalising of civil partnerships in 2005. Given that these changes all occurred during the silent period, it is expected that either side of the years 2000-2005 would reflect different attitudes to homosexuality. Indeed, they observe that words relating to *homophobia* and Islam are significant from 2006 onwards, suggesting that this was an emerging way in which Islam was being related to homosexuality in more recent media.

## Data & Discussion

### Mail Online

A Mail Online article titled, "[\*My father tried to 'cure' my homosexuality by performing an EXORCISM on me, says former Muslim extremist who fantasised about blowing up Canary Wharf but has now left Islam\*](#)", reports a 23 year old self-identified gay ex-Muslim, Sohail Ahmed, who was taken by his father to a 'religious healer' to 'cure' him of his homosexuality. The experience distressed him to the point of near suicide: "*It got too much for me. That's when I realised I have to leave home or else I would have killed myself.*" The article ends with the

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<sup>52</sup> See for example, "From a Same-Sex Attracted Muslim: Between Denial of Reality and Distortion of Religion" *Muslim Matters*, Aug 22 2016 <http://muslimmatters.org/2016/08/22/from-a-same-sex-attracted-muslim-between-denial-of-reality-and-distortion-of-religion/> where the author (a same sex-attracted Muslim) argues for the acknowledgment of same-sex attraction in the Muslim community, but rejects the arguments of progressive scholars who try to re-interpret Islam to accommodate homosexuality. Muslim responses to the article are generally very positive.

statement: "According to the Koran, homosexuality is a punishable crime and sin." 44 comments were posted.

The article is significant because it deals directly with one of the most prominent themes covered by the media regarding Islam and homosexuality - that is, examples of Muslim persecution of homosexuality. Furthermore, the added 'jihadi' angle sheds interesting light on the prioritization of 'evils'. Although this thesis does not critically analyse the discourses of article content and headlines as has been done elsewhere (Van Dijk 1999, Poole 2002, Richardson, Elgamri 2008), this article in particular is filled with extremely emotive notions. Calling the 'treatment' undergone by Ahmed an "EXORCISM" (*capitals theirs*) incites instant feelings of horror, as if Muslims conceive of homosexuality as a kind of horrendous, satanic possession. This emphasis on exorcism combined with a picture of Ahmed who is of clear south Asian descent, also carries with it a sense of de-humanising barbarism, associating such inhuman and primitive acts with eastern cultures. There is also the added emotive stake of the young man being so disturbed by his treatment that he considered taking his own life and eventually leaves Islam. This would presumably be received with empathy from readers but the *Mail Online* had framed the young man as a "former young jihadi who once dreamt of carrying out a terror attack on Canary Wharf" when he was 17. This seemed to instantly remove Ahmed from being seen as a victim, despite the hardships he faced. The focus on the jihadi association was clearly more important:

*This guy doesn't deserve any compassion.*

*Are we supposed to feel sympathy for someone who once dreamed of blowing us up?*

*So his family accepted him as an extremist but not being gay?! Well that's worrying.*

*Is the fact that he was going to kill a lot of people not more concerning?*

*I would rather my son be gay any day than being an extremist and killing innocent people. Just my own thought..*

*I'm always in support for gay people and their struggles for acceptance but not ex jihad ones!*

*Pretty much every gay person has a tough time coming to terms with it and making the choice to live as who they are - some in very difficult situations such as this guy. But 'had fantasies about blowing up Canary Wharf'?... Will his fantasy come back? This one needs a VERY close eye being kept on him.*

*One to watch out for*

*Still would'nt trust you mate.I'd be locking you up incase you change your mind again.*

*Please tell me this man isn't residing in Britain. You just don't undo being a jihadi.*



This finding concurs with other studies which highlight the reluctance of the media to portray Muslims as victims, preferring to show them aggressors (Poole 2002, Knott et al 2013, Baker et al 2013). The association with radicalisation is especially recurrent for Muslim males, while Muslim women are most often seen as victims of other Muslim men (Baker et al 2013). Considering only 44 comments were posted, this is a substantial number of users who demonstrated a complete lack of sympathy for Ahmed. Only one commenter expressed the contrary, highlighting that he was just 17 when he had the terrorist thought, and that: *“This young man showed how strong he is in very difficult times. Of course we should feel some sympathy for him”*. The user’s reasoning was that an individual should not be condemned for not acting on a terrorist impulse because it sends a negative impression out to others who may be in a similar position, making *“it harder for them to leave the family behind”*. Indeed, leaving his faith/family, was suggested to be the only solution. The fact that he did leave his faith was not expressed in the triumphant and frequent manner that one would expect:

*Well if one of them can grow up and leave a backward religion, there's hope*

*That is one sure way to fight extremism and remove the threat to the general public. Here is one potential terrorist that has been neutralised. The governments and the people of European states should be more proactive in encouraging more and more people to leave the religion*

Surprisingly, there was only one clearly positive comment about him leaving Islam. It is likely that there would have been more had Ahmed not been framed as a former jihadi. The latter comment here only sees it as good insofar as a potential terrorist has been “neutralised” by leaving the faith. This also reflects the polarisation of the debate regarding homosexuality and Islam in the media; that individuals who have same-sex attraction should leave Islam due to their incompatibility:

*Religion and homosexuality do not mix, stop trying to force it! Not everyone is going to be accepted; that's life.*

Thus the article pushed and pulled with sensational and emotional details that ultimately left readers hardly sympathetic to a case that would have otherwise been worthy of concern. Yet, it is unclear how sympathetic commenters would have been had there been no ‘jihadi’ association. Might the lack of sympathy been due to him simply being a South Asian (former) Muslim, while his ‘jihadi past’ was merely a means to covertly justify the lack of sympathy? In another *Mail Online* article, [\*“Killed for 'being gay': ISIS savages blindfolded man and threw him\*](#)

[\*off tower block - then stoned him to death when he SURVIVED the fall\*](#)", many comments did in fact express sympathy such as "poor, poor man", "rest in peace", "I cannot begin to imagine the horror he went through" and "I feel physically ill and my heart weeps for this poor person". The man killed was not linked to terrorist activity and readers had no reason to believe that he did not have a Muslim background. Thus, it is likely that Ahmed may have received more sympathy had the 'jihadi' link not have been made. The implication is significant since it demonstrates how sensitive the issue of radicalisation is to the British public (Baker et al 2013). Despite Ahmed's conveyed traumatic experience, many of these readers were not able to see past his 'jihadi past', despite it being relayed as no more than an isolated desire at the age of 17. And even after leaving Islam, users warn to "watch out" for him, implying that the terrorist tendency may lay dormant.

Baker et al (2013) mention that the *Daily Mail* had been quite negative in its representation of homosexuals, depicting them as militant, promiscuous, and shameful/shameless.<sup>53</sup> There may be a conflict of interests, therefore, when Muslims are the ones expressing views against homosexuality. This is captured well by one *Mail Online* article: [\*Muslim Cambridge University lecturer apologises after claiming that being gay was 'ultimate inversion' and homosexuals were 'so ignorant'\*](#). Here, there was potential inner tension since the readership is generally assumed to dislike Muslims and gays. One comment reads: "Haha, it's amusing how the DM readers are very quiet on this one- they must not know which way to go!" Nevertheless it seems many did know where to go, since the majority of comments condemned the (white) Muslim lecturer for his remarks. This perhaps suggests how the discourse has shifted since Baker's (2005) study.<sup>54</sup> However, others did defend the right to free speech, and highlighted the fact that the remarks were made 15 years ago.

It is interesting to note that neither in the comments for this section, nor in the ones forthcoming, are Muslims significantly accused of homosexuality. In another *Mail Online* article covering [\*ISIS's persecution of gays\*](#), a couple of commenters do state "I suspect most of the so called 'fighters' are gay themselves, most of their mates are rapists or paedophiles anyway. Seems like 'Isis' attracts losers and perverts who can't find girlfriends anyway", and "I thought they were all gay". It is hard to determine whether these sentiments are indeed a

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<sup>53</sup> Baker (2005) cited in Baker et al (2013).

<sup>54</sup> That is, the negativity towards Muslims has superseded the negativity towards homosexuality among *Daily Mail* and *Mail Online* readers.

reflection of the more classical accusation of homosexuality amongst segregated frustrated Muslim men in the Early Modern and Victorian periods (Daniel 1993, Hopwood 1999). Instead, it could well be a reflection of reverse accusation; the well-researched and now popularised idea that such aggressors “may be threatened by gays and lesbians because homosexuals remind them of similar tendencies within themselves”<sup>55</sup>. This idea is not at all exclusive to the anti-Muslim discourse.

Unlike the veil, which perhaps represents the crown of symbolic threats regarding Muslim presence in Britain, Muslim reaction to homosexuality manifests as a realistic threat (Stephan et al 2009). This is not only because of tangible harm that certain individuals may suffer as a result of such views, but because it directly challenges their political status and thus the political climate of the country. Immigration may also be perceived as a part of this threat insofar as certain foreigners and visiting speakers are seen to perpetuate homophobic perspectives. There also appears to be far less intergroup anxiety concerning Islam’s alleged view on homosexuality. With other aspects of the faith, non-Muslims might hold back from expressing certain opinions due to fear of being perceived as racist or Islamophobic. However, this is not so much the case in the current context, since attacking religious beliefs in defence of the basic human rights is not a general cause of embarrassment or ridicule. However, as will be discussed below, some users might use this ‘justified’ position as a springboard from which to attack Islam more generally.

### **Huffington Post I**

Three articles and their comments from the *Huffington Post* were analysed. The main article examined was written by the *Huffington Post*’s political editor, Mehdi Hasan. Its title, [\*As a Muslim, I Struggle With the Idea Of Homosexuality – But I Oppose Homophobia\*](#), is a fair summary of its content. This article was particularly suitable for analysis due to the fact that it directly sets up the conflict of values between a Muslim (who holds a view that many modern Muslims would hold) on the one hand, and those of secular liberal Britons on the other. The article was also useful because not only does it address Islam and homosexuality, but it offers a chance to see how members of the British public would react to a Muslim who neither condemns homosexuality outright nor promotes it unconditionally but rather, holds a more

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<sup>55</sup> University of Rochester, “Is some homophobia self-phobia?” *ScienceDaily*, 6 April 2012 <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2012/04/120406234458.htm>

nuanced approach - an uncommon angle in the media. As Mehdi Hasan explains: *"I'm a progressive who supports a secular society in which you don't impose your faith on others - and in which the government, no matter how big or small, must always stay out of the bedroom. But I am also (to Richard Dawkins's continuing disappointment) a believing Muslim. And, as a result, I really do struggle with this issue of homosexuality. As a supporter of secularism, I am willing to accept same-sex weddings in a state-sanctioned register office, on grounds of equity. As a believer in Islam, however, I insist that no mosque be forced to hold one against its wishes."*

Hasan then goes on to list examples of homophobia, which he strongly condemns, and clarifies that he wants to see a society free from discrimination, demonisation and abuse for all minority groups: *"Jews, Muslims, gay people and others"*. The article yielded 447 comments.

While the article is significant because it is authored by a Muslim and therefore has potential to dissent from overarching anti-Muslim narratives and challenge common perceptions (can Dijk 1991), the reaction to Hasan's article was mixed but mostly negative both towards Hasan's position and Islam in general. A number of people took issue with his statement: *"I know it might be hard to believe, but Islam is not a religion of violence, hate or intolerance"*. This was responded to with arguments and examples from the past and present in an attempt to show otherwise. There were also a number of jokes about "winged-horses" made famous by an *Al-Jazeera* debate with Richard Dawkins where Hasan conceded that acknowledgement of such a creature was part of his faith and that he did indeed believe in miracles.

### Comparing values

Many commenters appeared to react predominantly to the title of the article and in particular to Mehdi's choice of words, and played on his use of the word 'struggle'. This was occasionally used to reverse the charge back on what are perceived to be Islamic values.

*As a British man i struggle with understanding Muslims. It's well documented that the prophet Mohammed married Aisha when she was just 6 years old but was good enough not to consummate that union until she was 9 years old ! Homosexuality and homosexual marriage kind of pale into insignificance when compared to that.*

*I struggle with the idea that people would want to belong to a religion that advocates raping young girls and slicing up their genitals.*

*What, seriously, is there to struggle with? Homosexuality is a normal, natural variant of human sexuality.*

*If you struggle with the idea of equality for all then isn't it time to leave a belief that causes such thoughts?*

*as a human being i struggle with the idea of islam. but i do my best not to hate them.*

*opening comment "as a muslim, i struggle" quite rightly you should struggle as a muslim, muslims are making us all struggle by their constant land invasion through mass breeding, bring poverty crime and terrorism*

*You are a human being before being Muslim. How about some basic humanity?*

*There exists no reason for you conflict other than the reality of human nature vs. the BS you were indoctrinated with as a youth.*

*The Quran sanctions sexual slavery. That means you likely don't struggle with the idea of capturing a woman in battle and using her as you desire. But you do struggle with the idea of two consenting adults of the same gender engaging in a sexual relationship. I think you need to reevaluate your sense of morality.*

A number of important points can be drawn from these sentiments. First is the obvious fact that commenters see homosexuality as a normal and natural phenomenon, and therefore, not something morally objectionable. This clearly contrasts sharply with 19<sup>th</sup> century European perspectives which considered same-sex acts and homosexuality as immoral and as a sexual deviance (Krafft-Ebing 1894). Second, moral tensions between certain aspects of Muslim and modern liberal British culture are revealed with a number of commenters referring to what they find morally abhorrent about their perception of Islam. In particular, the Prophet's marriage to Aisha, slavery, nonconsensual sex or rape, and female genital mutilation, amounting to some of the most topical areas for western critics of Islam (Brown 2014). The claim is that these issues are far more morally repugnant than a sexual relationship between two consenting adults. A couple of commenters in particular took issue with Mehdi's reference to homosexuality as 'an idea', which he makes in the title. They claimed that homosexuality was not an idea, but "*part and parcel of who we are as human beings.*" This fits adequately into Foucault's (1978) thesis of the "species" of "the homosexual" being born, and into what McIntosh (1968) saw as the positive re-claiming of the term from the 1960s onwards. The argument from users would appear to be that to criticise homosexuality is to criticise a part of a person's innate identity and thus amount to a gross breach of universal human rights. In this respect, discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is perceived as similar to discrimination on the grounds of race. To confirm, the most popular comment in response to the same article re-published in *New Statesmen* reads: "*Am I meant to be grateful or something? Imagine an article entitled "As a white man, I struggle with the presence of Asians in this country, but I oppose racist discrimination". Would such an author be exempted from an*

*accusation of racism?*"<sup>56</sup> Homosexuality as an identity label being imposed upon Muslims to accept and being demonised if they do not - despite Muslim culture never historically having such a label - is exactly Massad's (2007) argument against what he calls the 'Gay International'. That is, the collective political, human rights organisations and activists who espouse the acceptance and promotion of LGBT labels and identities worldwide, especially in non-western countries.

### A backward culture

As was the case with attitudes towards the veil, commenters seem to imply a universal moral hierarchy, with Islamic values being perceived as backward compared to those of enlightened secular liberalism (Poole 2002, Massad 2007, Elgarmi 2008):

*Mehdis co-religionists have many centuries to go before they catch up with rational, compassionate, humane thought.*

*I believe you are either born gay, straight or somewhere in between. This belief is based on research and science. Most religious people believe being gay is immoral based on teachings from the Iron age by people who didnt know where the sun went at night.*

*I find it astonishing that in the 21st century people can still think that historical religious taboos are relevant to what are, as you say, normal variants of the human condition.*

*books written at least fifteen hundred years ago were fashioned by those who knew very little about the world. Why would anyone live his or her life according to the words of people steeped in ignorance? The average person back then could barely read or write.*

*I don't need a centuries old religious text to tell me what's right or wrong. Whilst I understand that my values are very much a product of my own culture, it seems ridiculous to choose to live by the values written down at a time when slavery was seen as OK.*

What is striking about such comments is the cultural and temporal distance at which such views on homosexuality are placed. It is implied that Mehdi's opinions belong to a foreign and distant culture which is '*centuries old*', '*from the iron age*' where uneducated people adhered to a backward morality that contradicts science and rational thought (Samman 2012). Such sentiments tend to also be shared by Muslim LGBT proponents, claiming, for example, that Islam is "200 years behind Christianity in terms of progress on gay issues" (Pakistani American founder of LGBT organisation, cited in Massad 2007: 175). From such impressions, one would hardly guess that the decriminalization of homosexuality, and later, government

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<sup>56</sup> "As a Muslim, I Struggle With the Idea Of Homosexuality – But I Oppose Homophobia", *New Statesman*, May 20 2013 <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/sport/2016/07/1966-and-all>

acts prohibiting discrimination based sexual orientation, only occurred in Britain in very recent history. There is thus a gross exaggeration as if such users are overly eager to distance themselves from what are now considered morally abhorrent views.

In a study of religious young adults about their sexuality, Yip et al (2009) found that there was a clear desire for more discussion regarding faith and sexuality in the mainstream. It was hoped that such engagement would encourage understanding and respect between non-religious and religious people. However, as Hasan's article demonstrates, this might be difficult to accomplish, especially where Muslims are concerned. Discussion of sexuality and Islam in the mainstream seems, for the most part, not to encourage respect and understanding but to trigger anti-Muslim sentiments. Hasan's article exemplifies that even a position that holds a more liberal approach to homosexuality with a strong condemnation of homophobia, is still met with hostility because it acknowledges traditional Muslim values.

### Nuance is not good enough

Many commenters accused Hasan for sitting on the fence and not being clear enough in his opinions. It would appear that for the most part, his nuanced stance of "struggling with homosexuality" while at the same time abhorring homophobia was simply not good enough to suit the values of many British readers:

*If you adhere to a religion that sees homosexuality as immoral or unnatural, then you are still part of the problem. It's progress that you don't want to impose your religion's bias in the secular world but it's still a bias and it's still wrong... It's as if you are saying "no offense but you are perverted...but I mean that in a nice way". ...and thinking it's not offensive.*

*Riding the fence son?*

*What a "safe" piece - neither here nor there. The author seems to be saying: "Yes, as a believing Muslim I don't agree with homosexuality but since I am forced to live in secular times and a secular country, I will tolerate it or actually no - because Islam is all about tolerance, respect and brotherly love - I will consider gay people my brothers in humanity." Ridiculous. As a reader, I am left here asking myself - what does he really believe? Does he believe his religion may be wrong on this one, and isn't saying it for fear of being judged by co-religionists as not a "believing Muslim?" Or, does he believe homosexuality is a choice/sin and stops short of saying it for fear of being judged by his co-secularists, liberals, etc as an Islamic fundamentalist? A little more courage and/or a little more self-reflection - both hallmarks of good journalism - will have made this piece more than the flip-flop rambling that it is.*

*Mehdi, there's a fence in a corner of a nice field.....why don't you just go and park your 'but' on it!*

*I do not then see how it changes anything to try to back out of this by saying you still "respect a person" and do not criticize their lifestyle etc -- often with the common follow-up of "judgement is reserved for Allah alone" or something to that effect. Sure, it is better than lashing out violently either verbally or physically - that's not it. IF you believe in Islam, and that Allah is the almighty creator and ruler of the Universe, and he \*will\* punish people for these acts in the after-life, then there is a serious disconnect here somewhere. "Not judging" is pretty*

*much an easy way of avoiding to face the harsh facts here of what the religion actually teaches on this subject. Actually, you are then raising yourself above the moral standards of your god, in that you are more compassionate and tolerant than him*

The comments clearly reflect dissatisfaction with Mehdi's position, reflecting back a polarized framing of the issue as typically conveyed by the media. His nuance is perceived almost as cowardly and disingenuous with the assumption that he does not want to upset proponents on either end of the debate. This also reflects the wider contention of these issues in both western and Muslim society (Whitaker 2006, Kugle 2010). Massad identifies this tendency as a fundamental characteristic of 'the Gay International'. Their fight, says Massad, is "not an epistemological one but rather a simple political struggle that divides the world into those who support and those who oppose "gay rights"" (Massad 2007: 174). The last comment quoted here raises an important critique for Muslims who want to respectfully remain nonjudgmental about people who commit same-sex acts, while at the same time, hold on to views that God will punish such people. The accusation is that this would necessitate that such a Muslim sees himself as above and more compassionate than God and His divine law. Perhaps stereotyping religious people as very judgemental in the secular world gives rise to the perceived absurdity that a religious person would know that an act is wrong but not feel the need nor right to explicitly condemn it. Alternatively, this comment possibly signifies another way in which Muslims are being forced to choose a side, namely, by being made to feel like remaining non-judgemental is a theologically invalid position.

### [Leave Islam or leave liberalism](#)

A couple of commenters advised Mehdi Hasan to leave the faith of Islam to relieve him of his struggle. The idea was that he should fully embrace secular liberalism whereby religion no longer informs his views. On the opposite side of the religious-political spectrum, there were a couple of Muslim commenters who clearly condemned homosexuality and reminded Hasan of its place in the religion. One of these commenters stated that "*no person who is a true Muslim should allow himself or herself this satanic idea of same-sex marriage enter in his or her head*", and thereafter prays for "*Allah the Almighty to destroy any person who calls himself or herself a Muslim and wants to introduce this sinful and shameful act of same-sex marriage into Islam.*" This commenter seemed to write under the assumption that homosexuality was a lifestyle choice and complained that it was something being "promoted" in the current age. Another Muslim commenter assured Mehdi Hasan that he need not be confused any longer, for



*"[h]omosexuality according to the Islamic Religious law, is not only a sin, but a punishable crime against God"* and Muslims should not be trying to apologize or adapt it into the Muslims tradition. One Muslim commenter took a slightly gentler approach to Islam's view of homosexuality:

*Being born a homosexual is not a sin, being attracted to the same gender (without choosing to do so) is not a sin, committing sexual acts of homosexuality is a sin in Islam. The belief goes that if a person is born into being attracted to the same sex then it is this persons life long test from Allah. What is anyone's test and purpose in life? To follow obediently the Qur'an and Sunnah; that is the meaning of a Muslim, the one who has submitted. So a homosexual who is Muslim, his/her duty is to lead a sexually oriented life according to the Qur'an and Sunnah which entails getting married to the opposite sex and having kids period. It is also true that the capital punishment for homosexuality is death in Islam. That ruling was established by prophet Muhammad pbuh because it was a established ruling in the Jewish faith by Prophet Moses pbuh. To have any other opinion and be in support of any other opinion leads one outside the fold of Islam.*

This comment demonstrates the confusion even amongst Muslims regarding the position of homosexuality in Islam, despite such a person showing some level of intelligence and coherence. A few points worth mentioning is the unquestioned acceptance of the 'born gay' discourse, an insensitive assumption about the ease with which Muslims with same-sex attraction can marry someone of the opposite sex, and an ignorance regarding 'punishment' for same-sex acts in Islam.<sup>57</sup>

### Muslim responses

A few more comments made by self-identified Muslims also expressed a variety of opinions; some appeared to condemn homosexuality outright explaining that it was in no way justified under Islamic values. Others trod a line similar to Hasan's claiming that homophobia was against the teachings of Islam and that no Muslim should ever abuse another human being. This play between the balance of Islam's merciful ethics on one side, and its strict sexual laws on the other is a central debate in discussing Islam and homosexuality in the west (Kugle, 2010, 2014). To what extent can values of love, mercy and compassion override or mitigate some of the religion's apparent legal prohibitions?

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<sup>57</sup> The Hanafi school of law, not seeing male-male sex (*liwat*) as an equivalent for male-female fornication (*zina*), does not consider it a capital offence. The Shafi'i school of law does, and judges the act according to the status of the men involved: married or unmarried, the latter also evading capital punishment (Adang 2003). These scholarly nuances are often ignored by such British Muslims arguing against homosexuality. This is even more curious in light of the fact that the vast majority of Muslims in the UK adopt the Hanafi school of law and should therefore incline towards the more liberal position.

## Likening Homophobia to Islamophobia

At one point in the article, Hasan mentions that homophobia and Islamophobia are both social ills that people should condemn. For Hasan these “phobias” are akin to racism, sexism and xenophobia - they are all morally abhorrent. Such a lack of distinction was not accepted by a number of commenters, who instead, argued that fearing Islam was a legitimate fear (therefore not really a phobia) and shouldn’t be compared to homophobia:

*Islamophobia is akin to homophobia? How is that? Religion is no different from political affiliation. If human beings have a choice, if they have any form of free will, then religion is a choice. You have chosen to be muslim. A gay person does not choose to be gay. Sexuality is not a choice. That's a fundamental and real difference. Religious types are forever trying to sneak their way onto the list that includes gender, sexuality, race, nationality ... in order to absolve themselves of criticism.*

*it's either stupid or cynical to conflate sexuality and religion. one has no choice in the former, and every choice in the latter.*

*A phobia is an irrational fear! How many gays are going about the world bombing busses, mosques, schools and markets? How many homosexuals “honor” kill or throw acid into the faces of those who reject them? How many gays are waging holy war against straight people?*

These sentiments reflect a wider resistance from many non-Muslim laymen and professionals to considering Islamophobia as similar to racism or homophobia. The perception is that while racial and sexual identities are involuntary categories of birth, being a Muslim is a choice, “*no different from political affiliations*”. Meer and Modood (2009) consider this objection and claim that it ignores the fact that people do not choose to be born into Muslim families with Muslim names, nor do they choose to be born into a society in which being or looking like a Muslim creates suspicion and may put someone at a social disadvantage. Similarly Kelly (2010), in carrying out an interview with Samir, a Bosnian self-identified gay Muslim about his identity, found that Samir saw being Muslim as an integral part of his identity, especially within context of the Bosnian civil war and Muslim persecution: “*It’s part of who I am. Muslim is an identity that has caused Bosnian people to be a victim of a civil war.... It makes me cling on to my identity as Muslim. I had to go through the experience because I was a Muslim, and I can’t just reject my religion, like, that part of myself because, in a sense, I’m rejecting everything that happened to me*” (Kelly 2010: 239). As we shall also see in the next articles examined, “Islam is your choice” proponents underestimate how connected Muslims may feel to their religious identity.

## Who deserves to be 'bashed'?

An interesting issue about tolerance and the interchange of gay/Muslim bashing came up in the discussion. A Muslim commenter had opened up the topic by drawing a distinction between being opposed to something in opinion, and being opposed to something with oppression and violence. Only the latter was expressed to be unacceptable. The idea was that people should be able to have their opinions, without being aggressively bullied by any side: *"Gay bashing" is wrong, however so is the "bashing" of anyone who opposes it... Just as it is a Muslim's right to choose not to condone homosexuality it is the right of homosexuals to not condone what we believe.*" The conclusion, which seemed to be shared by a couple of Muslim commenters and others, was "live and let live." The following response came from someone who self identified as gay:

*Except gays are NOT "bashing" people who oppose us. We are not demanding that Muslims be banned from marrying. We are not demanding that Christian churches be required to marry same-sex couples. We are not the ones sacking people from their jobs, evicting people from their homes, breaking up families, driving people to suicide. Calling bigotry what it is is not "bashing". Demanding our basic human rights is not "bashing". Homophobes and bigots do not get to pretend they are the victims here.*

A central point being made here stems from an earlier theme: that homophobia and Islamophobia cannot be compared. The aggression from the "religious" towards those in the LGBT community is perceived to be far greater than the aggression from those in the LGBT community towards those who are religious. Religious people are pictured here as actively seeking to obstruct and sabotage the happiness of LGBT individuals, while the latter are pictured as merely demanding basic rights. However, another responder from the LGBT community highlights the other side of the argument with the following words:

*The most horrific verbal abuse towards people of faith seems to come from gays or LGBT supporters - I am bi and athiest and I am embarrassed by the degree of hatred expressed by many gay posters here.*

This phenomenon of LGBT activists and individuals showing anti-Muslim hate relates to the analytic category of "homonationalism" (Puar 2013), which is defined as "a deep critique of lesbian and gay liberal rights discourses and how those rights discourses produce narratives of progress and modernity that continue to accord some populations access to citizenship—cultural and legal—at the expense of the delimitation and expulsion of other populations. The narrative of progress for gay rights is thus built on the back of racialized others, for whom such progress was once achieved, but is now backsliding or

has yet to arrive” (Puar 2013: 337). Homonationalism, along with its anti-Muslim narrative amongst the LGBT community is acknowledged within academia as a social and political phenomenon, but is contentious in its explanatory power (Zanghellini 2012). Within this framework, right wing conservatives may mobilize the support of white LGBT whites for their anti-migrant and anti-Muslim narratives, uniting in their construction of Muslims as being problematically homophobic (Zanghellini 2012).

This small exchange between commenters opens up a number of important issues. When, if at all, is “bashing” OK? Or, to put more accurately, when is bashing normalized, and, therefore, seen as OK? Normalising negative stereotypes of certain groups of people in the media through biases and continuous reproduction has indeed been a standard process within racist media structures (van Dijk 1991). This has led to a phenomenon whereby negative statements can be said about Muslims, which would not be acceptable for other minority groups (Poole 2002, Richardson 2004, Meer and Modood 2011). Another central point in this discussion can be re-articulated as follows: To what extent should we pressure people to change views, which they and their community have *passively* held for generations? This is strictly in reference to those who do not try and force people into certain lifestyles, nor verbally impose their ideas on others, but rather live non-intrusively in accordance with values of their own tradition - the likely perspective of a large number of Muslims. However, this “live and let live” attitude is not the reality in the Muslim world. As Brian Whitaker (2006) shows, common attitudes and laws in the Middle East often lead to the murder and execution of LGBT individuals, giving reason for the latter to fight for rights and identity acknowledgment. The question is then, do Muslims have the right remain silent on the LGBT issue, and are they siding with those who explicitly condemn (and persecute) LGBT groups if they fail to so? As a wider debate of this article demonstrates, a nuanced position is far from being welcomed by all.

### None of your business

Some commenters expressed the opinion that a person’s sexuality was simply none of anyone else’s business - particularly that of a Muslim heterosexual writer:

*hundreds of millions of us worldwide do NOT struggle with the idea of homosexuality. For us it is as natural as your nose is to your face. It's astonishing to me that you should even have an opinion at all about something*

*about me that has NOTHING to do with you. The point?...Nice of you to share your struggle with us all...now...go mind your OWN business. And tell your Imams to do the same.*

*I struggle to understand why so many heterosexuals need to give an opinion on homosexuality as if it actually affects their lives.*

*Us poofs don't really care what Islam or Christianity or Judaism thinks of us (although Christianity and Judaism at least have the Quakers and the Reform Jews who think we're human too). We want two things. We wanted to be treated just like everyone else and we want to be left alone.*

*The ultimate question to me is, why does it even matter what two people completely uninvolved in others' affairs do with each other? Two men sleeping together was never a big deal until Abrahamic faiths were brought into the mix. Until then it was just a natural part of sexuality pretty much all over the world (name a culture, you've got a history of gayness involved) and as long as men were fathering children they could do whatever they wanted with each other. Why is someone's faith so threatened by someone else's desire to live their life the way they want? Maybe they should examine their own belief if that faith is so easily jeopardized.*

This raises the important point of consideration: to what extent is even discussing this issue making it appear more important or 'hotter' than it is? Why should heterosexuals be discussing the lives of homosexuals? There is a potential paradox here between this point and previous points. If Muslims are being challenged to state their views on homosexuality, with anything but clear and whole condemnation or full approval being classified as cowardly, or "sitting on the fence", then they are left with little choice. Another *Huffington Post* article, to be examined below, written by an anonymous self-identified gay Muslim counters this, however, as he complains that the Muslim community do not discuss the issue enough.

### Positive comments

Only six comments of 447 clearly praised the article, most of which commended Hasan's courage and honesty. Rather than focus only on the title of the article, these readers tended to resonate with Hasan's strong stance against ill-treatment of all minority groups. Notably, one of the positive comments was from a gay man who concedes that he struggles with the idea of Islam. Still, this did not prevent him from agreeing with Hasan's article and praising it for being "*honest and generous in spirit*." Such a sentiment is important since it shows that Hasan's stance is not necessarily inherently offensive to the LGBT community. This raises the question of whether or not the commenters who aggressively disagree with him are doing so for other reasons such as possessing a predisposed antagonistic attitude towards Islam and/or Muslims.

A number of issues were raised which were not prominent in the comments but still worth mentioning. There seemed to be a difference of opinion surrounding the definition of

homophobia - a debate also academically disputed (O'Donohue and Caselles 1993). One commenter clearly accused Mehdi Hasan of being homophobic despite Hasan's claim to oppose it. The accuser explained his or her position by maintaining that any moral dubiousness directed at homosexuality is homophobic because moral questioning of a minority group can lead to dehumanisation. In contrast, another commenter writes: *"Not every individual who finds teenagers pretty are paedophiles. Not everyone who has a collection of Robertson's Gollies or sings Baa Baa Black Sheep to their children or grandchildren racist. Nor are all those who dislike the concept of homosexuality actively homophobic."* This debate represents the sensitivity and quick accusations that are common in identity politics of the current climate. Some commenters even accused Hasan of lying, judging the article to be some kind of public relations cover to his deeper, darker Islamic agenda. They also explained that this type of lying was allowed in Islam.

### Is the emphasis necessary?

Another commenter voiced his or her frustration regarding the negative focus religious people put on homosexuality and not on other religiously contentious issues: *"There are plenty of things people do that never receive the same condemnation. When was the last time the rights of divorced folks were condemned? Pig eaters? Not often."* This point has a relevant basis. In a classical list of major sins, which are ranked in order of greatness, sex between a man and woman outside of wedlock is ranked higher than male-male intercourse.<sup>58</sup> In other texts, lesbianism is ranked even lower and sometimes does not even get a mention in a list of major sins at all (Ali 2006, Amer 2009). There are also accounts from the Prophet that, under very specific conditions, the blood of a Muslim can only be spilt for adultery, apostasy, or homicide, not same-sex acts (Wafer 1997). The implication is therefore that illicit heterosexual sex is a greater crime than homosexual sex among either gender, yet the focus is disproportionate. It is also interesting to note that being rude to your parents is ranked as a greater wrong than all illicit sexual acts and can therefore theoretically be argued to be a bigger 'crime against God'. Yet there seems to be far less of an outcry from Muslims against people over such matters.

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<sup>58</sup> *Reliance of the Traveller*, translated by Nuh Ha Mim Keller, p.559 <https://www.thereligionofpeace.com/quran/the-reliance-of-the-traveller.pdf>

### An unrepresented population?

Uniquely, one commenter posted: *As a heterosexual male I struggle with the idea of homosexuality but I oppose homophobia...leave the religion out of it please.* This was the only comment in which someone conveyed a discomfort for homosexuality irrespective of religion. This comment highlights a potentially important limitation of this research. That is, there will be readers who are not fully comfortable with homosexuality, but due to fear of being heavily criticized (as Hasan has been) such people may not choose to comment. The article itself points out that a 2010 British Social Attitudes survey showed that 36% of the public regarded same-sex relations as “always” or “mostly wrong”.

### Huffington Post II & III

Another two articles from the *Huffington Post* were related to each other in content. One was written by a self identified gay Muslim titled, [\*Gay Muslims: The Elephant in the \(Prayer\) Room\*](#), who argues that Muslims need to start discussing issues regarding LGBT individuals and provide the right support and advice instead of avoiding it or giving generic unhelpful advice: *“I can’t count the number of times I’ve wished that I weren’t gay... sexual orientation isn’t a choice, Muslim communities need to stop sweeping the topic under the carpet”*. Having come to terms with himself and finally receiving support, the writer expresses empathy for others who might continue to be alone in their struggle: *“If you’re a Muslim coming to terms with the fact that you’re gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, I’m not going to offer you some generic advice and avoid the your actual concerns altogether, as some scholars might... The Muslim community needs to do more to support those of us who are LGBT. However, I can say that you’re definitely not alone.”* The second article, titled [\*Muslim Community needs to ‘Stop Avoiding’ Gay Issue, Says Student\*](#), written by *Huffington Post* multimedia editor, Lucy Sherriff, was based heavily on the first article, expanding upon it in places with brief examples of other self-identified Muslims and Muslims scholars speaking on the issue. Many of the comments from these two articles overlap with the themes addressed above and there is therefore little need to re-paste them at length here. The comments for both articles totalled 171.

### Equal numbers at each extreme?

The reaction to the Muslim student (only known as F. Yusuf) consisted of much advice and support. He was referred to a number of LGBT organizations, including “Imaan” in the UK and “Muslims for Progressive Values” in the US. Within the comment section, one female Muslim commenter even offered herself as a counsellor of sorts to another commenter expressing his distress of being a gay Muslim. There were again a couple of comments from Muslims at either end of the tolerance spectrum. One arguing *“we need to support all our family in seeking the best for them regardless of their race, religion, sex, sexuality.”* Another writes, *“The Islamic issue concerning gays is clear. The Ulama is in agreement and the ahadiths and the Quran is against it. Under shari'ah law, if witnesses are found to testify to such acts, execution is order”.*

Interestingly, the balance between Muslims expressing supportive compassion on one hand, and harsh condemnation on the other was about equal for these articles, and for Hasan’s article.

### Not a choice, but God-Given

The emphasis on homosexuality not being a choice was repeated. Yusuf had already mentioned in the article: *“I can't count the number of times I've wished that I weren't gay. One simply cannot choose to be gay. How many of you actively chose to be straight?”* In support, commenters expressed that *“God made you that way.”* Therefore not only is Yusuf’s sexuality seen as innate and unchangeable, but God-given, and therefore, (more) positive. The call upon *“God made me this way”* is a familiar way in which self-identified queer Muslims without extensive ‘theological’ training argue against those who say homosexual activity is religiously forbidden (Kelly 2010). This, again, raises the emphasis on choice. One commenter made a distinction between this God-given nature and Islam, arguing that what is innate should take precedence:

*If you're gay, you were born that way. Nobody taught you to be gay, it came naturally to you. If you're Muslim, you were NOT born that way. Someone taught you to be Muslim -- FORCED you to be Muslim when you were too young to object. Islam didn't come naturally to anyone, not even its prophet. If you're concerned about God's intentions, look at what he made -- you -- instead of what humans made -- Islam.*

The argument echoes similar sentiments from above regarding being Muslim and being gay not being comparable since one is innate like a person’s race, and the other is ideological like



a political affiliation. However, as we have seen, not all Muslim who have same-sex attraction feel this way and do choose to prioritise their religion over their sexual inclinations.

### Leave Islam

Some encouraged Yusuf to simply leave Islam:

*No offense, but I think you should change your religion... Having all that mental anguish and moral anxiety all your life can't be good.*

*If I disagreed with the fundamental principles of a group or society I probably wouldn't bother joining it in the first place and if I was born into it I would make it my business to leave post haste. Simples ! Job Done ! End Of !*

These comments not only undermine the deep attachment some Muslims have to their religion (Meer and Modood 2009, Kelly 2010) but also show a strong detachment from the negative reality of LGBT Muslims who express their sexuality publicly to their families and communities. Scott Kugle (2014) documents the lives of such individuals in his book *Living out Islam*, in which such Muslims face extreme difficulties in the forms of physical abuse, mental harassment, exile, and death threats from for “coming out”.

### Muslims and Christian reactions to homosexuality

The usual ‘backward’ discourse against religion was also present. One commenter expressed a similar point regarding religion but distinguished between Christianity and Islam, claiming that the former was more progressive than the latter on this issue. A Muslim commenter replies below:

*I rarely applaud Christianity, and even now I do so with only faint praise, but at least Christianity seems to be BEGINNING to consider alternative sexualities seriously - though with a long way to go - Islam hasn't really even begun.*

*Reply: I'm not sure what you mean. Homoeroticism is a huge theme in the literature of Muslim lands. Same-sex attraction is discussed pretty candidly. For example Ibn Hazm is a highly important Islamic scholar who many people would argue was a (chaste) homosexual. There are medieval texts which discuss transgender people too (And even the Ayatollahs in Iran have been pretty tolerant when it comes to supporting reassignment surgery). Muslims have already considered alternative sexualities seriously. The issue is that post-sexual revolution Western societies disagree with the answers given by Islam.*

*Counter reply: Then it seems, perhaps, that I must bow to a greater knowledge than my own. Thank you for open my eyes somewhat.*

This is an important exchange because it shows how gently expressed knowledge can allow polite understanding to develop between people who would initially appear at loggerheads. The Muslim replier was unique in that he had more knowledge on Islam's position on homosexuality than most other Muslim commenters.<sup>59</sup> A typical commenter on the *Huffington Post* would likely be unaware of such arguments and would perhaps never come into contact with such information regarding Islam. This exchange gives a positive example of what could happen if greater understanding existed between communities.

### Muslim, homosexual, and still traditionally Muslim?

Lastly, one comment came from a sympathetic Muslim who self-identified as homosexual:

*Yusef ya Yusef ,you arent alone ,I believe every single person has a problem in his/her life and yours(and mine) is being a homosexual ,we didnt choose it nobody does but we choose how we behave and I think we can control our instincts .Betawfee2*

This position was hardly expressed elsewhere but has great significance to the discourse of Islam and homosexuality. Here we have a self-identified homosexual Muslim who situates his or her sexuality as a 'problem' among other life problems that people may have. Although the commenter did not give examples, it is possible that he or she had in mind typical life problems possibly relating to finance, emotions, health, employment, family, etc. While the commenter seems to suggest – in corroboration with other commenters – that homosexuality is natural and not a choice, the conclusion arrived at is different. For most secular liberals, homosexuality is natural and should therefore be freely expressed and encouraged. For this Muslim commenter, homosexuality is natural but these 'instincts' along with their relevant behaviour are to be controlled. This comment fits a very unique paradigm of understanding: an acknowledgement of homosexuality as a natural orientation, combined with a belief that it is not acceptable in Islam. Yusuf's position is itself ambiguous and could potentially also fit this paradigm since he says nothing about acting or wanting to act on his orientation. This raises the question of the number of Muslims who may self-identify as gay or lesbian, but similarly acknowledge that it is not inline with the Islamic vision, and choose not to act on such urges.<sup>60</sup> An example of such Muslims are those who engage in an online *Yahoo* group called "The Straight Struggle" (support group) - one of many online spaces where Muslims can

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<sup>59</sup> Additionally, the same commenter corrected the earlier, harsher Muslim who condemned homosexuality with the death penalty, stating that this was not the case in the Hanafi school of law.

<sup>60</sup> Yip et al (2011) had seen a similar sentiment from a self-identified Christian homosexual who desired to have a non-sexual relationship. He too expressed that this was not understood by mainstream society.

gather to discuss their sexuality and experiences away from the mainstream community (Bunt 2009). Here, the aim is to provide “a safe environment of interaction and mutual support for same-gender attracted Muslims”. They claim that they do not have a cure for homosexual urges and that some of their members are married, some are single, some are divorcees. “To make it clear: the group position is that of mainstream Islam, namely it is that same-sex attractions in and of themselves are not haram in Islam. What is haram are any sexual actions outside of marriage between a man and a woman.” Here, hundreds of Muslims engage with one another, support each other and draw on resources for advice. Engagement with academic literature is welcomed by the group. Indeed, the work of Kugle and openly gay imam’s is sometimes seen by such individuals as distorting the message of Islam and further confusing Muslims with same-sex attraction. Muslims who believe that Islam can accommodate same-sex relations, while not as prevalent, are still far more vocal than voices such as these.

### Conclusion

It was mentioned above that criticism towards Islam throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century was based on the premise that European values epitomized a standard from which all moral values would be judged. While the very same framework of judgement in perceiving Islam occurs here, the general standard of values has changed. As Massad asserts: “while the premodern West attacked medieval Islam’s alleged sexual licentiousness, the modern West attacks its alleged *repression* of sexual freedoms in the present” (Massad 2007: 175). The comments clearly illustrate that homosexuality, and more importantly, the identity of “being gay” is perceived as a natural, innate and unchangeable phenomenon likened to racial categories. One is simply ‘born this way’ and thus any negative judgement concerning the morality of homosexuality can only be interpreted as a realistic threat of bigotry and a breach of basic human rights. In the comments analysed, Islam is largely condemned for being against homosexuality; the very same religion, which, a little over a century earlier, was condemned for advocating same-sex relations. Baker et al’s (2013) study helps to locate part of this shift in pro-gay legislation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which was also reflected in their findings about Islam and homosexuality in the media.

Given that the same religion can be accused of contradictory charges at different points in time, it would seem that the actual content of the religion is almost irrelevant to such charges. The western moral structure appears to *seek* moral contrast with the opposing civilisation (Said 1995). This point is illustrated in the example of early European readers of the Qur'an who interpreted its verses – verses which are the same today – to licence homosexuality. Thus to a large extent, the necessary imperative to construct moral polarity precedes actual instances of moral difference. Not only is it the case that the values of the ingroup change, but that the values of the outgroup must, in measured opposition, change with it. This might imply that as the support for ideas surrounding homosexuality in Britain intensifies, so too will the condemnation of Islam's alleged homophobia, thus maintaining the contrasting balance. The resulting picture still looks somewhat like Said's orientalism with a liberal face: assuming cultural superiority while imposing Eurocentric ideas onto non-western lands in the name of freedom. This may not be negatively intended, but it is certainly the status quo.

Not only was there a clear lack of nuanced discussion in the debate about Islam and homosexuality, but there was an active push towards polarisation. The realistic threat of homophobia also appeared to heighten antagonistic attitudes (Stephan et al 2009). Particularly lacking was a representation of Muslims that did not necessarily support homosexuality, but emphasised a non-judgmental and compassionate stance towards those with same-sex attraction. Even when a Muslim used his position as journalist to voice such a stance, he was met with negativity and was criticised for not choosing a side. Polarisation was also reflected in suggestions from users to 'leave the faith' so that these issues are no longer intellectual or personal struggles for Muslims. The evidence suggests that nuanced stances on these issues are generally not welcomed in the mainstream media. Also lacking in representation are Muslims who struggle with same-sex attraction for the sake of keeping within the bounds of their religious tradition. Many comments also suggested that criticizing Islam's position on homosexuality was a platform from which to attack Islam more generally, bringing up other criticisms such as the prophet's marriage to Aisha, rape, and violence.

Broadly speaking, then, attitudes of non-Muslims in the media concerning Islam and homosexuality are shown here to be a volatile ground for discussion. Furthermore, there is a natural and inherent tendency to polarise the debate. This is very likely a reflection of how media articles themselves frame the issue between pro-LGBT secular liberals on one side, and

condemning Muslims on the other. Unfortunately, this is at the expense of a wide variety of important considerations and positions discussed above. While certain posts and comments do offer more opportunity for a plethora of opinions, the overall tendency is polarized reduction. The reality is that neither side of the debate as represented by the media is particularly helpful to the betterment of Muslim/non-Muslim relations. On the contrary, it appears to fuel more antagonism through increased otherisation and vilification.

## Chapter 6: Polygyny

Within the socially relevant critique of Islam, Muslim polygyny has been another notorious point of contention. Both morally-sensitive themes of women's social position and sexuality are conjured up by this single issue, making it an instant point of fascination for many outside the faith. The way in which such 'fascination' has manifested itself, however, has differed according to the changing social and cultural climate of the time. In the modern context, while the Muslim veil is seen to represent the most prominent of symbolic threats regarding the Muslim presence in Britain, Muslim polygamy - due to the association of female subordination and 'benefit sponging' - encapsulates both a symbolic and realistic threat as framed by the integrated threat theory (Stephan and Stephan 2000). The current chapter will briefly outline polygamy in general before looking at polygyny in Islam and European reactions to the practice historically. This will be followed by the main section of this chapter, analysing modern attitudes to Muslim polygamy through user comments from news journals, and framing tensions within the context of intergroup theory.

Polygamy is a form of marital union which exists on all continents of the world and in most cultures (Zeiten 2008). They are of three distinct kinds: (i) polygyny, where a man is married to multiple wives; (ii) polyandry, where a woman is married to multiple husbands; and (iii) group marriage, where multiple husbands are married to multiple wives. The prevalence of polygamy as a custom has undergone a constriction - at least morally, due to the normalisation of western monogamy throughout the world as well as the championing of a certain type of women's rights (Jonas 2012). Nevertheless, despite most examples being found in African, Middle-Eastern and Asian societies, polygamous unions are not inherently non-western. Mormon fundamentalist still practice polygyny in the state of Utah in the United States (although it is constitutionally outlawed).

Anthropologists and sociologists have rigorously sought to identify causes for polygamous patterns in societies as well as establish social factors that validate their cultural acceptability. More often than not, polygamy is practiced in the form of polygyny where one man marries more than one woman. Such an arrangement tends to be heavily dependent on economic and demographic factors (Møller and Welch 1990). Studies in Southern Africa, for example, have argued that polygamy supports the stability of the family or clan, as well as their continuation.

In addition, polygyny in certain societies provides social security and economic support for women, and is considered to be the most efficient means of producing a larger family within a single lifespan. A greater number of wives and children consolidate the family's economic standing with a larger labour force, while increased offspring also provides parents greater social security in old age (Chavunduka 1979). This is particularly important in communities where child/infant mortality rates are high and life expectancy is low (Cook 1997). However, there are also studies which suggest a negative correlation between rate of polygyny and child survival, which challenges the classic demographic argument for polygyny (Amey 2002). Where applicable, however, the social and economic benefits of polygyny are of central importance to traditional societies where family and clan are the main source of power, security, and welfare (Chavunduka 1979).

Historically, polygyny had usually occurred amongst the socially elite and affluent, rendering rates of polygyny in rural areas considerably less due to financial constraints (Bouhdiba 2012). This has led a number of anthropologists to conclude that polygyny has traditionally been a luxury of wealthy men and has always remained an exception rather than a rule ('Abd al 'Atī 1977). For some societies, the extent of a man's practice of polygamy has a positive correlation with the size of his political influence. In Inca Peru, for example, governors and chiefs are permitted an increasing number of maximum wives: 8, 15, and 30, depending on the size of the population over which they are responsible; while kings are permitted hundreds (Zeiten 2008). This has the effect of consolidating the political power base of those who are already in position of authority since they have immediate dominance over more children and their lives. More biologically-oriented reasons for polygamy include those that say men are more naturally inclined to multiple partners compared to women due to their greater capacity for physical dominance and aggressive sexual arousal (cited in 'Abd al 'Atī 1977). Other reasons might be more circumstantial such as when a brutal civil war in Sierra Leone in the 1990s encouraged polygamous patterns among their population to repopulate the nation (Zeiten 2008).

Western critics who condemn polygyny typically perceive it as an irrational and sensual practice of male privilege, which oppresses women ('Abd al 'Atī 1977, Zeiten 2008). This discourse sits inside orientalist narratives of cultural superiorization, emphasising the civility of monogamy, over the backward, morally depraved, sensual, and unenlightened East (Said

1995). Such prejudice has not only affected the integrity of western anthropological scholarship on the subject, but has also impacted the common perception of polygamy among indigenous cultures that would otherwise consider it culturally acceptable. As Zeiten explains, “[t]he spread of Christianity and European-based legal codes through colonialism, and the imposition of state laws on aboriginal peoples living within the borders of modern nation-states, have spelt the end of polygamy for many people” (Zeiten 2008: 4). As a result, many people in Africa, for example - traditionally known as the most polygamous continent - today perceive polygamy as socially and morally inferior to monogamy. This is increasingly becoming the case with Muslims also.<sup>61</sup>

### Islamic and Pre-Islamic Polygamy

Sharia law of both Sunni and Shia schools of thought allow a man to marry up to four women simultaneously, subject to certain conditions. For the Sunnis, this stipulation, which is in accordance with the Qur'an, the traditions, and the scholarly consensus, has been generally approved in both word and deed since the time of the Prophet to modern day. In most of the Muslim world, the ruling is strictly adhered to with Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Kuwait, and Oman all ruling that a man cannot marry a fifth wife until one of the present four is divorced and her waiting period is over (Nasir 2009). Tunisia and Turkey are exceptions to this Middle Eastern and North African standard, where their laws stipulate that polygamy is illegal and anyone convicted of such a crime may be imprisoned for one year and/or need to pay a fine. In Pakistan, polygamy is also allowed with written permission of the first wife. However, this has recently been called into question as the clerics of the Council of Islamic Ideology have announced that there is no religious obligation to demand such permission.<sup>62</sup> In Yemen, permission is not sought from the first wife, however both wives must be made aware of the arrangement as to marry polygamously without either party knowing is forbidden. Indeed, a wife's consent or happiness with her husband wanting to marry another woman seems to be given little regard in Muslim societies, despite the Prophet's example.<sup>63</sup> There

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<sup>61</sup> Women are more likely to disapprove of polygamy than men. For example, in Morocco 46% of women object strongly, while only 22% of men share the same attitude: <http://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2014/11/144746/40-percent-of-moroccans-are-against-polygamy-survey-2/>

<sup>62</sup> “Polygamy and Child Wives: Women's Rights Are Going in the Wrong Direction in Pakistan”, *New Republic*, October 24 2014 <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119982/pakistan-islamic-council-laws-are-rolling-back-womens-rights>

<sup>63</sup> The Prophet insisted on monogamy for the sake of his daughter's emotional well being: *Bukhari* Volume 7, Book 62, Number 157: “I heard Allah's Apostle who was on the pulpit, saying, “Banu Hisham bin Al-Mughira have requested me to allow them to marry their daughter to Ali bin Abu Talib, but I don't give permission, and will not give permission unless 'Ali bin Abi Talib



have been a number of contemporary Muslim scholars and reformers such as Egypt's Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) who have attempted to demonstrate that polygamy should not be invariably permitted, basing their arguments on two statements in the Qur'an: "if you fear that you will not be equitable, then marry only one" (4:3); and, "you will never deal justly with them" (4:129) (Brown 2014). But traditional scholars have tended to explain this away by claiming that the first verse refers to material provision, while the latter refers to emotional inclinations, which are impossible to control ('Abd al 'Ati 1977).

The environmental context into which the Muslim faith was revealed had a variety of marriage and relationship practices which were amended or rendered forbidden during the Prophet's life. Among these were polyandry, where a woman would have (or be made to have) sexual relations with multiple men (*nikah ijtimah* or combined marriage). This example is especially relevant to modern discourses of Muslim polygamy amongst non-Muslims since, as we shall see, there is consistent questioning of why polygamy is not not allowed for women as well as men in Islam. A tradition explaining a form of polyandry in pre-Islamic Arabia is attributed to Prophet's wife, Aisha, is translated as follows:

"a group of less than ten men would assemble and enter upon a woman, and all of them would have sexual relations with her. If she became pregnant and delivered a child and some days had passed after her delivery, she would send for all of them and none of them could refuse to come, and when they all gathered before her she would say to them "You (all) know what you have done and now I have given birth to a child. So it is your child **so and so**! Naming whoever she liked and her child would follow him and he could not refuse to take him." <sup>64</sup>

The above tradition is often used in anti-Muslim discourse and by some to show that the status of women was more favourable before the spreading of Islam (Mernissi 1987). Such a conclusion would require a number of assumptions to be imposed upon the tradition, not least of which would be a woman's consent to such an arrangement. William Smith mentions this tradition in his *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia* (1903) and believes that it relates to a later period within the Arabian culture to a polyandrous-matriarchal tradition, when identification of paternal lineage, common today, was becoming increasingly universal as a familial norm. For some pre-Islamic matriarchal tribes, given the inability to determine who the father was in some polyandrous kinship groups, children in pre-Islamic Arabic would be known to be of the mother's lineage. As the doctrine of individual paternity was fully

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divorces my daughter in order to marry their daughter, because Fatima is a part of my body, and I hate what she hates to see, and what hurts her, hurts me." [http://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari\\_7\\_62.php](http://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/Bukhari_7_62.php)

<sup>64</sup> Reference: *Sahih al-Bukhari* 5127 <http://sunnah.com/bukhari/67/63>

established, however, it became important for a single man to be identified as the child's father to carry his name. Thus women earned the right to identify a father from among her sexual partners in congruence with the patriarchal custom.

More generally, Smith argues that women would often be procured by capture or by contract into polyandrous unions. In the case of the former, generally, the number of victorious men in battle would exceed the supply of women captured, and thus the women would be shared among a group of kinsmen. Where unions were contracted, a woman would have been purchased with a payment of a dowry to her family, and be shared amongst kinsmen in like manner. Of course, consent was not always valued in the ancient and medieval world as it is today (Laiou 1993). The social significance here is that a number of related men would have ownership of a single woman, thus keeping her and her children within the familial structure.<sup>65</sup> It suffices to say that the notion of the woman's consent might not be so easily assumed. Smith also considers that one of the reasons for polyandry in certain areas of pre-Islamic Arabia was the scarcity of women as a result of female infanticide (Smith 1903).

Hammudah 'Abd al 'Atī (1977) lists no less than 13 other types of marriage and cohabitation practices that were known in pre-Islamic Arabia. These included *Istibdā* or 'wife-lending', where a husband would allow his wife to cohabit with a distinguished man in hope for noble offspring, as well as 'marriage by inheritance' where a widow could potentially be inherited like property to the heir of the deceased husband. In such times, it was not prohibited for a man to marry his father's widow or ex-wife. Also included were 'secret cohabitation', 'experimental cohabitation' and 'marriage exchange', where men would trade their wives and daughters with one another with no need of a dowry. The standard contractual marriage commonly known today also predated Islam and became the default form of marriage under Islamic Law. Differences in the Islamic contract included the dowry being paid directly to the bride, not her family (Ali 2006), and the limit of four wives to every providing husband ('Abd al 'Atī 1977). This is illustrated by accounts of highly polygamous men coming to the Prophet after embracing Islam, and thereafter being required to divorce as many of their wives as necessary to arrive at four (Daniel 1993).

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<sup>65</sup> A comparison can be made to Tibetan polyandry where a woman is married to multiple brothers, thereby maintaining neater familial lines for land ownership and inheritance purposes.

Reasons given by ‘Abd al ‘Atī for the continued but limited polygyny in the time of the Prophet primarily come down to two: i) the Muslims had a need for progeny to build up and reinforce their budding community, which was often under threat. And ii), there were many widows and orphans who had lost their supporters and were in need of material and moral support in a time where no state budget could provide for them. Furthermore, the preference for genuine patriarchal lineage required the identification of the father, necessitating that women remained monogamous. Other, more modern, cited reasons to justify polygamy in Islam include the statistical shortage of men compared to women in certain communities. Also offered as a reason is that a wife may not be able to give birth or is too sick for intercourse.<sup>66</sup> However, this latter reason suffers the inequality of not allowing a woman to marry another if her husband is sick or impotent without divorcing him. Fazlur Rahman (d.1988) had argued that the institution of polygamy, like slavery, was impossible to eradicate at the time of the Prophet due to the amount of people who would have been left homeless and unprovided for, and that the Qur’an implicitly seeks to abolish such practices overtime with its acute emphasis on marrying one and freeing slaves (Ali 2006). Indeed, this is a way in which many modern, liberal and feminist Muslims make sense of such institutions in Islam (Ali 2006).

### Christian Critique of Islamic Polygamy

The official position of the Catholic Church is that monogamy is the only valid marital union. Although the Bible does not exclusively prescribe monogamy, there are references which describe marriage as when ‘two become one flesh’ (Gen. 2:24, Matt. 19:6). Thus any polygamous Muslims converting to Christianity would be obliged to retain only his first wife (Witte 2015). The Old Testament itself has examples of polygamous relationships including those of exemplars and prophets, Solomon and Jacob. The New Testament, on the other hand, gives no direct authority for polygamy nor explicitly condemns it. There have been rare occasions where religious figures have been more open to polygamy. Martin Luther (d. 1546), for example, had pointed out that polygyny did not contradict scripture (Schauer 2008), but such opinions did not influence general Christian attitudes.

Early Latin Christian fathers were staunchest against the practice of polygamy and even considered remarriage after divorce to be, at best, a form of successive polygamy and, at

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<sup>66</sup> Quadri, Z. (2015) “Why polygamy is allowed in Islam?” *Pulse* June 15 2015 <http://pulse.ng/religion/plural-marriage-why-polygamy-is-allowed-in-islam-2-id3867122.html>

worst, adultery. Tertullian, writing in the 3rd century, had strongly objected to a woman marrying another man even after the death of her husband, for this would amount to being married to two men: one in spirit and one in the flesh (Snuth 1990). Augustine (d. 430), however, drew the line at death and allowed widows and widowers to remarry (Witte 2015). There was a misunderstanding by Latin Christian thinkers as to how many wives were allowed in Islam, and on occasion, how many husbands for each woman. Some thinkers from the 12th and 13th century assumed, for example, that polygamy for men was both unlimited and unregulated, while others assumed the number was capped at seven, nine or ten. The latter limit came from French Poet, du Pont, who also assumed that women could marry ten husbands (Daniel 1993) - a possible misunderstanding of the above mentioned hadith on pre-Islamic polyandry. French theologian, Jacques de Vitry (d. 1240) mocked at this alleged phenomenon in Islam claiming "the more [women] a man can impregnate, the more religious he is regarded."<sup>67</sup> Only a few more accurately affirmed the limit of four wives, and acknowledged the obligation of the husband to treat his wives justly and equally.

Thirteenth century Christian perceptions of Islamic marriage were distorted further by an inability to perceive marriage as anything other than its Christian configuration. By such standards, a Muslim woman's divorce with the freedom to remarry another man was considered a type of polyandry since she could not be conceptually dissociated from her first husband (Daniel 1993). Moreover, many early Christian writers saw polygamy as "excessive" in comparison to indissoluble monogamy. In the context of pre-Islamic marital customs, however, the law of the Qur'an had reduced the theoretically unlimited marital unions of men to a maximum of four, commanding marriage to only one wife if unfair treatment of co-wives was feared. Islamic polygamy was, therefore, restrictive in its own sociological context, as opposed to excessive. Still the imbalance of polygyny, whether restrictive and regulated or not, was perceived as being harmful to society on the whole. Bishop of Paris, William Auvergne (d. 1249), for example, argued that death did not discriminate between the sexes, and that polygamy upsets the natural balance by allowing powerful or wealthy men to hoard more women than their 'natural share'. This not only leads to increased competition amongst other men possibly leading to violence, rape and abduction, but in the polygamous union itself, leads to misery amongst wives and necessary neglect amongst children (Witte 2015).

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Witte (2015) p.159

The distaste for Muslim polygamy was increasingly expressed by Christian writers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries who wrote on the ethics and laws of Islam. As with the case for heterosexuality over homosexuality, Victorian social Darwinism was an imposing ideological framework (Massad 2007). The moral superiority of monogamy was strengthened throughout the colonial period where missionaries travelling to Africa and Asia subsumed polygamous practices of indigenous cultures into the oriental narrative of irrational barbarism and lustful decadence (Said 1995). Monogamy was therefore not only presented as an alternative and default form of marital union, but one that is exclusively “civilised”. Accordingly, many Victorian writers saw “the Mohammedan woman”, subjected to polygamy and harem life, as being used for nothing more than sexual pleasure and procreation (Krafft-Ebing 1894). In *The Social Laws of the Qoran*, originally written in 1907, Robert Roberts opens his commentary on Qur’anic social law with the subheading: “The number of legitimate wives”. In it he claims, “No words can adequately express the great and many evils of polygamy, bringing, as it does, in its train the most degrading consequences to both sexes alike” (Roberts 1925: 8). At the same time, Roberts does draw a distinction that many other Christian writers did not, which was that the Prophet Muhammad did not invent polygamy, but rather, limited its practice, which was engaged in by the Arabs of pre-Islamic Arabia with ‘unbounded license’. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian writer, John J. Pool, also shares his concerns on Muslim polygamy, claiming that such a law is “unfortunately generous” as to the number of wives a believer may possess, bringing about “a fearful amount of discord and misery” (Pool 1892: 32).

Such Victorian thinkers, adopting the discourse of feminism (Ahmed 1992), clearly deemed polygamy as inherently harmful to women. Assuming the unquestionable superiority of monogamy, they seldom considered demographic, economic and other social factors which might prove beneficial. Instead, the permissibility of polygamy was generally seen as another male prerogative, which, along with earthly harems and sexual unions in paradise, was more proof to a Victorian prudish culture that the religion of Islam was obsessed with the fulfilment of sexual desire. Such opinions were not only true of white British non-Muslims of the Victorian era, but had also influenced the minds of elite Muslim civil servants of colonial British India. Deputy magistrate of the British imperial government, Delawar Hosaen, for example, wrote essays on Muslim social reform in India. While his concerns regarding the “evil” of polygamy were of a more sociological nature, his conceptual narrative of social Darwinism is remarkably clear:

"The history of the progress of Arab civilization and its decline and fall will prove to us that a high state of civilization is incompatible with the institution of polygamy. And the history of England and Europe will convince us that polygyny must be abolished before we can reach that intellectual and moral development which is secured by a high state of civilization." (Meerza 1889: 77)

Not all Victorian writers shared this sentiment, however. Schopenhauer (d. 1860) spoke positively of polygamous nations where every woman is provided for in contrast to monogamous nations where many women are destined to remain alone. In London, he reasons, there are 80,000 prostitutes whom he sees as drawing the short straw in the institution of monogamy (Schopenhauer 1970). Annie Besant (d. 1933) had also defended Islamic polygamy, and highlighted the 'hypocrisy' of the western world. She had claimed that western critics were "hypnotised" by the words 'monogamy' and 'polygamy' and failed to consider what realities lie behind their own society; namely, an abundance of mistresses and prostitution.<sup>68</sup> This precedes a similar sentiment amongst some Muslim authors today who counter the critical obsession on Muslim polygamy with the charge of hypocrisy in light of prevalent adultery, serial marriage, and out-of-wedlock births by men who take no parental responsibility in the West (Ali 2006).

The view against Muslim polygamy from Muslims themselves increased dramatically throughout the Middle East in the early 20th century when many countries opened up to Europe. Arab reformers in Egypt such as 'Abduh placed restrictions on polygamy, having been influenced by European thinking, while Turkey (since 1926) and Tunisia (since 1956) banned it (Nasir 2009). Today, it would appear that the majority of Muslims living in Britain are not inclined towards polygamy. A poll carried out by website singlemuslim.com (2010) on Muslim attitudes to polygamy showed that only 26% of Muslims surveyed believe that polygamy is legal in Islam and all Muslims have the right to practice it. Others (32.7%) said it was allowed only in exceptional circumstances.<sup>69</sup> As mentioned above this is largely due to the western normalisation of monogamous marriage worldwide (Zeiten 2008).

### Islam and Polygamy in the Media

Unlike search results for the Muslim veil or for homosexuality and Islam, current international

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<sup>68</sup> *The Life and Teachings of Muhammad*, Two Lectures by Annie Besant (1903) by The Theosophical Publishing House, India: <http://hpb.narod.ru/LifeTeachingsOfMuhammadAB.html>

<sup>69</sup> Survey reveals Muslim attitudes to polygamy (2010) <https://www.singlemuslim.com/pages/news/surveyrevealsmuslimattitudetopolygamy/PR/News>

media coverage of Muslim polygamy are not concentrated around a core set of themes. News items found by Google Alert with the terms “Islam” and “polygamy” from November 2014 to July 2016, revealed a wide and scattered variety of stories. However, the overwhelming impression was that polygamy was a negative social practice, with the focus often being on exploitation of women. Articles would emphasise that the Islamization of western countries leads to the social ill of polygamy being on the rise. A Canadian Parliament bill even grouped polygamy with forced marriages and honour killings under “barbaric cultural practices”.<sup>70</sup> Others would emphasise that many Muslims themselves are against polygamy. Rare but not absent, were reports framing polygamy around crime, such as was when a jealous co-wife was suspected of having her husband killed<sup>71</sup>, or as a health hazard, showing it increased the chance of heart disease in men.<sup>72</sup> Many articles covered the legality of polygamy in various countries in different ways. Plenty discussed its ban, most notably in India, but some looked at its benefits such as in Turkey where such marriage configurations might help with the Syrian refugee crisis. Regarding the UK, polygamy and the issue of benefit-sponging made an appearance. There were a few articles which aimed to clear up misconceptions about polygamy, highlighting the virtue of its historical use. Still, the general impression was suspect of how it is practiced today. One of the more repeated themes was the question of legalising polygamy in western countries now that gay-marriage had been legalised. Advocates were reported to claim that sanctioning polygamy was a logical follow-on to the liberal sanctioning of gay-marriage.

## Data & Discussion

In order to assess the British public opinion on Muslim polygamy today, I will be examining comment sections primarily from 3 news articles from *Mail Online* and *The Guardian*. On this occasion, I was not able to gather comments from the *Huffington Post* as no article on Muslim polygamy in Britain has yet appeared with enough substantial commentary for analysis. I have therefore made cross references to other articles and relevant comments from the *Mail Online* and *Guardian* sites where relevant. To help ensure the most comprehensive

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<sup>70</sup> “The ‘Barbaric Practices’ Bill Calls a Spade a Spade”, *The Huffington Post blog*, Dec 12 2016  
[http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/tahir-gora/bill-s7-barbaric-practices\\_b\\_6315840.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/tahir-gora/bill-s7-barbaric-practices_b_6315840.html)

<sup>71</sup> “Polygamy put under spotlight after British Pakistan's murder in Kashmir”, *South China Morning Post*, January 01 2015  
<http://www.scmp.com/news/asia/article/1672563/polygamy-put-under-spotlight-after-british-pakistans-murder-kashmir>

<sup>72</sup> “Polygamous Marriage May Be Bad for a Man's Heart”, *Yahoo News UK*, April 30 2015  
<https://www.yahoo.com/news/polygamous-marriage-may-bad-mans-heart-144829792.html?ref=gs>

representation of opinions, the articles chosen will address Muslim polygamy in different ways. The comment user interface for the *Mail Online* has the added feature of seeing the extent to which comments are both positively and negatively rated by other users. This feature permits the ability to see the extent to which other users share similar sentiments, or generally disagree, implying that such opinions exist minimally.

### Mail Online

Typical of *Mail Online* articles, the title summarizes its respective content: "[\*Mail Online: The woman who dropped out of Cambridge PhD to enter into polygamous marriage to Muslim businessman with two other wives\*](#)". The article speaks of a Nabilah Phillips who left her PhD to marry a man who is already married. Readers are informed that such polygamous unions "are illegal in the UK but allowed under sharia law". Nabilah reasons her choice of marriage to Jamaican convert to Islam, Hasan Phillips, by claiming that she was looking for someone who already knew how to be a husband. The content of the article is almost entirely drawn from a Channel 4 documentary, *The Men with Many Wives*, which follows a number of polygamous unions in Britain. There is no mention in the article that Hasan or his wives receive benefits (in the actual documentary he explicitly says that he does not, but this is not mentioned in the article). He is described as a "business man and charity worker" while each of his three wives are claimed to live in separate houses in London. The article mentions that the documentary estimates as many as 20,000 such polygamous unions in Britain and that they are rising. A total of 676 comments were divided into themes below.

The article was useful because it concerns a domestic case of Muslim polygamy which thus infringes upon British society and values directly. This brings up the analytic opportunity to look at a possible internal social threat (Stephan and Stephan 2000), as opposed to perspectives on something that Muslims do in far away lands (Daniel 1966, 1993). It was also useful because a wide range of themes were presented in the fairly extensive comment section which gives a good flavour of how the issue of Muslim polygamy in Britain is perceived by non-Muslims as a social collective.

Comments varied in opinion with an overall sentiment of negativity. As with previously analyzed articles, many people seemed to react to the title of the article only. This was



represented by comments mocking Nabilah's intelligence; for how could someone apparently so educated, do something so "stupid" and self-demeaning. This may reflect a finding by Baker et al (2013) which showed that media references tended to display a dislike or disapproval of Muslim women in a way not equivalent for Muslim men. The general sentiment seemed to be exacerbated by a high appreciation for the feminist struggle for equality in Britain, in spite of which, here was a woman who willfully abandoned her achievements and opportunities in order to be a co-wife. As one commenter put it: *"It's a pity, her contribution to humanity could have been much more than just being one third of a wife"*. A couple of commenters did not seem to be against the idea of polygamy in and of itself but simply expressed confusion over why she had to give up her education: *"be number three wife by all means - but why not be Dr number three wife? She should have finished her PhD and then got married"*. Other comments brought up the issue of equality, demanding that if polygyny is allowed, a woman should also be allowed more than one husband.

There were a number of jokes shared by commenters, which were usually a variation of: *"Three mother-in-laws? Not for me, thanks."* Such comments were rated highly positively among the *Mail Online* community, as if to imply a general consensus that mother-in-laws were an inherent nuisance. This occasionally extended to the wives themselves with comments like, *"Three wives.... I don't envy you fella!"* and *"Crikey, I struggle with just 1 wife"*, both of which were positively rated. Few commenters who questioned, *"why is this news?"* were reacted to negatively by the *Mail Online* community, implying that a significant portion - if not, the majority - found the article newsworthy. One commenter replied to such questioning with, *"It's news because it's ripping apart the social fabric that has been Britain for over 1,000 years"*. Pictures embedded in the article showed Hasan Phillips with his wives who all wore the face-veil. Nabilah is also shown individually with Hasan and appears to be smiling. Although the article was not about the veil nor about banning it, a demand for it to be banned came up more than a few times, demonstrating, again, that the rhetoric of "ban the burqa" is embedded into the minds of some of the British public.

### [This is illegal](#)

The most common comment coming from readers was an insistence that polygamy was illegal in the UK. From this, commenters expressed a number of grievances, which included

bewilderment as to why the individuals in question were not prosecuted, and how this was a blatant case of double standards:

*Is polygamy illegal? If so why no arrests? I'm white and Christian, I assume then that it would be ok for me to marry a few women.*

*There is no sharia law here only British law so to the police and politicians get some backbone and break these sham illegal marriages up.*

*Its illegal here arrest and prosecute simple.*

*Why haven't they been arrested yet, this is against British Law. The law of this country in ONE wife only.*

*It is against UK law so why isn't he arrested?*

*So they openly break the law in the UK. Meanwhile park on a yellow line.....*

*Why are these people living in the uk not subject to the uk law like the rest of us*

*I see its one law for 'them' and another for everybody else..*

*Sick of the double standards in this country, bigamy is illegal. Reform is urgently required*

*It is illegal in this Country end of!*

*Why is it that if we aren't Muslim we get arrested for bigamy in this country but they get away with it?*

*Polygamy is illegal unless you're a muslim. Welcome to PC Britain.*

The context here contradicts one of Allport's intergroup contact principles for facilitating positive relations: equal status. According to these readers, who appeared to be in the majority, Muslims are somehow operating beyond the law while the same actions carried out by a non-Muslim would lead to prosecution. The perception is that Muslims have an unequal status in the eyes of the law, which, for the contact theory, is a component in perpetuating negative relations between groups (Allport 1954). For such readers this is yet another example of such inequality concerning the legal/social status of Muslims in Britain. In chapter four, a similar sentiment of frustration was expressed regarding the veil. Namely, that a Muslim woman could enter a bank covering her face, while a non-Muslim wearing say, a balaclava, could not. Furthermore, such misinformation about the out-group - in this case, criminalising Muslim behaviour - stunts the ability for the in-group to actually learn about the outgroup which also works against the reduction of prejudiced attitudes (Pettigrew 1998).

The law to which such commenters were referring is under section 57 of the *Offences Against the Person Act 1861*, which stipulates that anyone caught entering into marriage while being

married to someone else is liable to imprisonment for up to 7 years.<sup>73</sup> However, the law is in strict regard to marriages that are contracted under British law. Most commenters therefore failed to acknowledge that Muslim polygamous marriages occur under a religious ceremony which are not recognised by British legislation.

A number of commenters responded to claims that the acts of these individuals were illegal by explaining the legal technicality. But such comments were a minority in comparison to counter-complaints and often seemed to go unnoticed:

*He will only be married to one legally under UK law, but "married" to the other two under Sharia, which is will have no standing in UK law. It'll just be a private arrangement as the other two wives won't have any legal standing in UK law.*

*Under British law he does not have three wives; he has one wife and two mistresses.*

*They were NOT married by British Law... Therefore they have broken no laws. Sharia marriages are the same as "common law" relationships. No laws govern how many people can live together or share a bed so... Unfortunately, No laws have been broken.*

These were usually stated as a matter of fact, and sometimes they were expressed with an element of complaint as if to express, 'so they're getting away with it'. In an equivalent *Guardian* article, "[The Men With Many Wives review – who would be a polygamist?](#)", which reviewed and covered the same Channel 4 documentary and issue, the outrage over legality was significantly less pronounced in the comments section. Where it did arise, other readers were more consistent in pointing out that only one marriage would be recognised under British law. *Guardian* readers thus generally demonstrated more awareness of this legal difference. Indeed, this distinction could be explained by the fact that right-leaning tabloid readers are more likely to emphasise negative attributes of ethnic minorities partly due to social and financial threat (van Dijk 2000, Baker et al 2013).

In a separate public address<sup>74</sup>, Hasan Philips had raised a moral contention with the legal status of marriage and polygamy in Britain, which he claims is 'one of the biggest contradictions of western society'. He takes issue with the fact that a man can have sexual relationships with multiple women other than his wife – and even father children with another woman – without being prosecuted, but if a man and two consenting women wanted to commit to a polygamous union, the individuals would be criminalized for bigamy. In the

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<sup>73</sup> *Offences Against the Person Act 1861* <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/24-25/100/crossheading/bigamy>

<sup>74</sup> *The Legality of Polygamy in the West*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2afZ7rseczI>

latter example, there is openness and mutual consent. In the former, there is betrayal, mistrust and potential breakdown of a household. Of course, adultery is still laden with much social stigma in British society, but its legal status compared to a consenting group of polygamists can appear to be intuitively perplexing. A few real life examples in the media help shed some light on these contentions. A *Liverpool Echo* article titled, “*Love rat bigamist has got away ‘Scot free’ says victim’s friend*”,<sup>75</sup> speaks of Maurice Gibney who married a woman abroad despite being already married to a woman for 17 years in the UK. It is interesting to note that the article labels the first wife as a “victim” consolidating the criminalization of his actions. In the *Mail Online* coverage of the story, a subheading states that his first wife believes “he should be jailed for the heartache he caused”. In the comment section, many of the most popular posts were appalled that he wasn’t sentenced to jail. Their negative reactions here thus seem to be inflated by the *legal status* of the relationship concerned. Since a law is also being broken, the action is viewed as being more morally blameworthy. This also appears to be true for the users in our current article.

## Weak Britain

Other grievances which came alongside the perceived illegality of Muslim polygamous unions were to do with Britain becoming ‘weak’ and soft’, as such actions by minority groups are being allowed to happen without consequence. Sometimes, the disdain was directed to the government, and sometimes to all major political parties. Where the latter case was made, the implication was that UKIP would be a better choice of leadership. This is supported by a number of heavily positively rated comments demanding “VOTE UKIP”.

*NO damn it...this is Britain NOT a sharia law nation....it is ILLEGAL here so why is Britain allowing it!!! Get real Britain....I HATE this country & what is happening to it!!! There simply is nowhere else to move to as it's happening everywhere*

*British government are to scared to do anything about it, frightened because they may be seen to be racist. Weak British government*

*Can someone please clone Sir Winston Churchill? We need a strong government desperately!*

*My goodness what have Lib,Lab, Con done to England in the last 40yrs.*

*once AGAIN this country and its laws are rolled over to keep a few minorities happy,,,,,bit by bit this country is being chipped away*

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<sup>75</sup> “Love rat bigamist has got away ‘Scot free’ says victim’s friend”, *Liverpool Echo*, Oct 26 2014  
<http://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/love-rat-bigamist-away-scot-8001556>

*The establishment hate us and have no respect for us.*

*The lib/lab/con/artists will not be satisfied until the native population of this country are in the minority as they are already in London and several major cities . Another reason to vote U.K.I.P.*

*We are mugs in our own country.*

*Soft touch Britain, the rest of us are paying for their life style. HOW PATHETIC, DAVID CAMERON*

*Illegal in the UK but they did it any way. Mockery and 2 fingers up to the British as usual >:-/*

*Future generations will suffer for the softie left and undemocratic society we now live in. We should feel guilty for allowing this to happen.*

It was clear that the story added to a greater anxiety about how Britain is changing for the worse, and Muslims in particular are a primary cause of this negative change. As a result, readers felt let down by the UK establishment. This was perhaps one of the clearest sentiments to be drawn from users. The comment, “*Politically weak and cowardly Britain*”, received 155 positive arrows, compared with only 6 negative. The perception was that the backward, misogynistic laws of a minority group were being imposed not only on British culture, but now also on British law. This is often based on an implicit ‘us vs. them’ binary in which the failing government was supposed to be on ‘our’ side. Here, we see another major block for both integration and the minimisation of prejudice according to the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954): not only has the situation represented a lack of equality due to readers getting a sense that it is one rule for them and one rule for Muslims, but there is also a clear perception of a lack of support from authorities. The UK government appears here to be allowing this to happen, creating mistrust among other citizens. Worse, still, is the perception that the authorities are in fact favouring the Muslim law over their own, thus exacerbating negative tensions and prejudice.

The support for UKIP in these comments reflects a general understanding that the lower-middle class, working class, as well as the unemployed, are more likely to vote for right wing populist parties than the middle class and above (Lubbers 2001). This is said to be due to the greater economic insecurity felt by such individuals, who consequently support political parties with anti-immigrant policies. As we shall see below, the sensitivity towards Britain’s welfare distribution - especially those going to ethnic minorities - also fits wider narratives regarding the relationship between socio-economic conditions and political inclinations (Lucassen and Lubbers 2012).

## Symbolic Threat

The tension was made more evident by another set of comments themed on the idea that 'Sharia law is taking over' - a rising theme in western anti-Muslim discourse (Bowen 2012). In these instances the concern was that Sharia law, and its permittance of polygyny, was seen as 'superseding' and 'overriding' British law.

*So sharia law now overrides British law. Why are we tolerating this?*

*Thanks to our cowardly government, Sharia law is allowed to trump English Law. Why do people still vote for Cameron, Clegg and Miliband, and their parties, they are all outright traitors.*

*Britain is fast becoming a country that's loosing it's identity..*

The symbolic threat of Muslim presence in Britain is especially pronounced in the anticipated 'takeover' of Sharia law. British values, morals, and beliefs are seen to be compromised by the culture of a minority group, thus further predicting prejudiced attitudes (Stephan et al 2009). In an ongoing poll conducted by the *Telegraph*, 89% of 15177<sup>76</sup> voters had answered 'yes' to the question "Are you worried about the impact of Sharia law in Britain?" Threats of this sort, however, are not always present for all societies hosting minority groups with different cultures. A previous study regarding Americans and Mexicans had shown that symbolic threats were not significant to a US sample of individuals, but were marginally significant in the Mexican sample in respect to Americans. This led researchers to conclude that "for members of powerful groups, symbolic threats may not be as salient as they are for less powerful groups" (Stephan et al 2000: 248). In other words, Americans did not fear the cultural takeover of their values and beliefs in the same way Mexicans did. This is not the case here, where it is clearly shown that despite being the less powerful group, Muslims are perceived to be posing a highly significant symbolic threat to British values. This indicates that Islam might be a uniquely threatening presence in majority non-Muslim countries, possibly because, unlike, say, Mexican culture, it appears to come with its own applicable laws which are perceived to be antithetical to western values and moral standards.

Against this frustration, some commenters would use Britain's Christian identity to negate the perceived growing prevalence of Muslim culture: "*Should not be allowed in the UK, no Sharia*

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<sup>76</sup> As of 9 December 2015: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/11952163/Muslim-men-having-20-children-each-because-of-polygamy-peer-claims.html>

*law in the UK. We are a Christian country if you live here live by our laws, as we have to in your old country!!!!*". This comment received 704 positive arrows and only 61 negative arrows. Christian-positive references, however, were not at all common throughout the entirety of this investigation. It is likely that the sense of identification with Christianity becomes more pronounced as the threat of Muslim law becomes more prevalent; religion is thus used to resist religion where establishment norms are concerned. A similar phenomenon had occurred in the mid 90s when, in response to the question of Muslim schools in Britain, news articles in opposition would emphasise Britain's Christian identity (Poole 2002). In another *Mail Online* article, "[\*Controversial Muslim entrepreneur creates dating site to help men find a second wife - with close to 35,000 British members\*](#)", one commenter highlights the reverse: *"Those who are against this, need to WAKE UP. This is the modern world. The UK needs to realise that the country is not just a Christian one no more, It's multi faith, and thats a good thing. Vote yes to get the UK out of the dark age."* The comment was rated 3rd worst out of 265, being red arrowed 908 times, and green arrowed 158 times.

### **It's none of anyone's business**

There were, however, a number of commenters who expressed that if the individuals were happy then it's none of anyone's business what they do:

*As long as they are all happy with the situation, and all free to end it if they become unhappy with the "marriage", then each to their own.*

*He can have as many wives as he likes as long as he pays for them all and does not claim benefits for them all.*

*Who cares it's her life as long as she's happy*

*Swinging is acceptable, open relationships are acceptable, gays are acceptable, gay marriages are acceptable, it's their life upto them.*

*His a business man and all the woman are happy, what's the big deal. His providing for his wives. End of. Live and let live.*

*The only wrong I see here is that she dropped her education....about marring the guy, well is not of my business! they are all consenting adults their problem.*

*Personally I don't really care how they arrange their family affairs as long as they fund them themselves, and that also applies to the many indigenous British people with children by more than one partner.*

*Love the way DM readers go on about freedom and democracy and then start chirping on about how people should live. They are hurting no-one, productive members of society and happy. Move on, nothing to read here*

These more liberal comments and opinions were a minority among *Mail Online* users. This is confirmed both from the number of times such comments arose compared to those which

expressed frustration and outrage, and also from the consistent majority-negative arrows such comments would receive. For example, one commenter simply wrote “*Her choice*” and was green-arrowed 179 times but red-arrowed 528 times. Another commenter posted, “*Despite the veil the lady is clearly smiling in the picture. If these adults are happy with this arrangement - and clearly not a drain on the state - it is their own business. And what man would want THREE 'mothers in law' - albeit 2 Common Law ones....*” and was green-arrowed 88 times and red-arrowed 776 times. In another *Mail Online* article addressing the creation of marriage site, SecondWife.com, the number 1 worst rated comment out of 265 simply read “*Up to them, couldn't really care any less..*”.<sup>77</sup>

The negative reaction to such comments, at first sight, has interesting implications towards the notions of happiness and consent in such social relations. As we saw with the comments regarding the face-veil in an earlier chapter, many users defended the wearing of the veil provided the woman was not being forced to wear it. This was met with a predominantly negative reaction which appeared to contradict the liberal championing of consent. Here, we have a similar context where a woman is shown to be happy both in her words and expression, yet the negativity towards her decision is fiercely potent. Also, the comments in this section seemed only to ‘approve’ of the relationship, insofar as the family were self-funded. This leads us to another set of comments which, along with the issue of illegality, were also among the most commonly posted:

### Assuming receipt of benefits

*There are many hundreds of these relationships which are costing the UK taxpayer millions in Housing and other associated benefits.*

*I bet each wife claims full benefits as a single mum as he only spends 2 - 3 nights a week at each property. Disgusting and must be stopped NOW!!!*

*These women have no self-respect. Besides, it's a money-making scheme for the man as all the child benefits get pooled and go into his bank account.*

*Guess what, because they are not legally married and are deemed to be single parents these women can live in different houses with housing benefit, income support etc. in their own right. Also, this is not news, it has been going on for years and you have been picking up the bill*

*How to milk the welfare state*

*I bet that we are paying thru the nose to house and keep all these people and all their children. Disgusting*

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<sup>77</sup> 1648 red arrows and 603 green arrows.



*And the British taxpayer pays for all the kids , crazy*

*The other wives will simply be viewed as 'single mothers by the gullible UK welfare system and paid accordingly.*

*More wives = more babies = more benefits .....*

*I wonder how much the good old British tax-payer has to fork out to keep these fed and housed and how many more are there like them*

*How much is good old muggins the British tax payer paying for this lot then.*

*It's sickening. Why should the taxpayer pay for families like this to breed?*

These comments demonstrate a deeper realistic threat posed by certain Muslims living in the UK. Negative stereotypes of this sort are a means of exerting power and dominance over the out-group who pose such a threat (Stephan and Stephan 2000). Moreover, the emphasis on ethnic minorities posing a socio-economic threat is said to be a typical feature of racist discourse (van Dijk 2000). For van Dijk, this one of the ways in which the media emphasises the bad of ethnic minorities, while de-emphasizing their good.<sup>78</sup> In this case, it falls into a preceding representation of Muslims in tabloid papers as 'benefit scroungers' (Baker et al 2013). All comments in this section were highly positively rated almost as if there was a consensus on affirming the welfare-based intentions of the polygamous party. For example, a comment which only stated "*Benefits*" was green-arrowed 603 times and red-arrowed 29 times, while the following comment, "*Bet all 3 wives are claiming benefits for being a single parent, I know of Muslims that do that and get away with it so easily!*" was green-arrowed 842 times and red-arrowed 38 times. Few defending comments were posted, sometimes isolated and sometimes as replies trying to point out that nowhere in the article did it state that the family were in receipt of benefits, and that he was a businessman so it should be assumed that they pay their own way. Such comments were generally rated negatively.

There may also be an exaggerated perception of how much tax money actually goes towards such arrangements. In another *Mail Online* article titled, "[\*The truth about polygamy: A special investigation into how Muslim men can exploit the benefits system\*](#)", the fourth best rated comment laments, "*It brakes my heart that 40% of my salary is used to support this kind of arrangement rather than people in need. I feel like I am being robbed and what makes it more painful is that I absolutely do not agree and support this kind of life, however I am forced to pay*

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<sup>78</sup> For example, contributions of immigrant workers to the economy are likely to be downplayed, while prejudice about foreigners 'taking our jobs' is emphasised (van Dijk 2000).

*for it. Injustice*". The comment was green arrowed 1598 times and red-arrowed only 35 times, suggesting that many readers approved of, and/or related, to the message. This fixation on benefits and economic threat from *Mail Online* readers is anticipated from its general right leaning, middle/lower-middle class readership (Lucassen and Lubbers 2012). Comments for the *Guardian* article covering the same issue, on the other hand, were significantly less pronounced in their complaints regarding benefits. This was in spite of the fact that unlike its *Mail Online* counterpart, the *Guardian* article *did* mention that one Muslim polygamous family in the documentary were indeed supported by benefit funds. This agrees with Baker et al's (2013) corpus study of British papers from 1998 to 2009, which, looking at 'Muslims on benefits' references specifically, found that the *Daily Mail* had over 400 such references while the *Guardian* had only 3. The benefits insecurity among *Mail Online* readers thus represents a clear realistic threat regarding the Muslim presence that has been reproduced over the previous two decades (Baker et al 2013, Stephan et al 2009). This reproduction of a specific negative cognitive model regarding a minority group is typical to racist discourses in the media and is powerful in shaping opinions (van Dijk 1991). Bound with a symbolic threat in the guise of an "illegal" cultural practice, the combination is seen to be compoundly abhorrent to *Mail Online* readers.

The media's association of Muslim polygamous marriages in the UK with 'benefit milking'<sup>79</sup> can be found as early as March 2000 when a *Daily Mail* article reported an Algerian asylum seeker with two wives and 15 children receiving over £50,000 in benefits along with "two fully-furnished four-bedroom houses with satellite TV, one for each wife and her children" (Baker et al 2013: 182-183). The issue appears to have emerged again in response to ongoing UK government reviews of benefit rules for polygamous marriages contracted overseas in countries where it was legal.<sup>80</sup> The *Mail Online* were one of first mainstream media outlets to pick up on this phenomenon in September 2006<sup>81</sup>, with an article titled, "[\*Polygamous husbands can claim cash for their harems\*](#)", addressing benefit laws for polygamous settlers in Britain. A single image features in the article, depicting over a dozen 'exotic harem-women'

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<sup>79</sup> This should be understood in context of the fact that the *Daily Mail* has played a significant role in developing the general 'Muslim on benefits' discourse in the UK. One of the earliest accounts speaks of Bosnian Muslims receiving state 'handouts' in 1999. This discourse is said to have increased considerably after in the first decade of the 21st century (Baker et al 2013: 182)

<sup>80</sup> "Polygamy Briefing Paper" Number 05051, January 6 2016: [www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/sn05051.pdf](http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/sn05051.pdf) The document indicates that the phenomenon has been considered from at least as early as 1973, though media attention didn't occur until much later.

<sup>81</sup> The earliest online mainstream media reference I found to discuss the issue. Baker et al (2013) also note a 'Muslim-benefits' shift towards the issue of polygamous marriages in 2006 in printed press.

some half naked, strewn around luxury cushions and ornaments, typical of orientalist representations of the East (Said 1995). The image is surprising since it would be difficult to find such an exaggerated, misapplied, orientalist depiction of Muslims in mainstream British media today.<sup>82</sup> The affluence of the sexually-enticing scene depicted, lends to the idea that Muslims are financially gaining from the welfare state, while enjoying their illegal pleasures. Other media outlets also reported on the issue in the following years,<sup>83</sup> though the *Mail Online* were the most consistent mainstream online news outlet to cover it. Not long after, in 2009, Baroness Warsi appealed to the British government to record religious marriages in the UK in order to prevent polygamy and extra benefits for additional spouses, raising more public awareness on the issue.<sup>84</sup> The *Mail Online* in particular ran two “special investigations” in February 2009 and September 2011<sup>85</sup>, discussing the issue in detail, citing examples, and presenting such ‘facts’ as: “if he has four wives - the maximum permitted under Islamic teachings - he can claim nearly £800 a month from the British taxpayer”. The theme then became so ingrained in the reporting of Muslim polygamy in the UK - particularly in the *Daily Mail* and the *Mail Online* - to the extent that our main article under analysis does not so much as mention the word ‘benefits’, let alone address the issue, yet the comment section is laden with such assumptions. This, again, indicates the strength of constructed cognitive or mental models regarding minority groups in the media (van Dijk 1995).

Comments regarding the consumption of benefits illustrate where much of the frustration regarding polygamous unions in Britain lies for *Mail Online* readers. The fear plays into a wider sentiment of fear-mongering regarding taxpayers’ money. Indeed, reports on benefit fraudsters are not restricted to Muslims in right-leaning papers (Baker et al 2013). The *Mail Online* is peppered with benefit fraud stories which are regularly met with anger from users - a staple theme for *Mail Online* editors. The following headings all occurred within a single week in Oct/Nov 2014: “[Mother-of-four jailed after claiming her partner was her landlord in](#)

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<sup>82</sup> More often than not, articles addressing Muslim polygamy today use an image of a single or multiple women in or *niqab/hijab* walking down a modern street.

<sup>83</sup> For example, “Muslims can claim benefits for several wives, say Ministers”, *The Express*, Feb 4 2008 <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/33753/Muslims-can-claim-benefits-for-several-wives-say-Ministers>

<sup>84</sup> “Muslim peer claims politicians are scared of discussing polygamy”, *The Telegraph*, Feb 21 2009 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/4734077/Muslim-peer-claims-politicians-are-scared-of-discussing-polygamy.html>

<sup>85</sup> “Polygamy UK: This special Mail investigation reveals how thousands of men are milking the benefits system to support several wives”, *Mail Online*, Feb 24 2009 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1154789/Polygamy-UK-This-special-Mail-investigation-reveals-thousands-men-milking-benefits-support-wives.html> and “The truth about polygamy: A special investigation into how Muslim men can exploit the benefits system”, *Mail Online*, Sep 23 2011 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2041244/Polygamy-Investigation-Muslim-men-exploit-UK-benefits-system.html#comments>

[£120,000 benefits scam](#)"; ["Benefits cheat mother-of-three who claimed she was single to steal £57,000 is jailed after posting her wedding pictures on Facebook"](#); ["Illegal immigrant couple pretended to be asylum seekers by using fake names and story then claimed £130,000 in state handouts for their five children"](#). A corpus study of British newspapers from 1998-2009 Baker et al (2013) had also found that right leaning tabloid papers, the *Daily Express*, *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, were far more in the habit of referencing Muslims receiving benefits than all other papers. This is, of course, in addition to other articles explicitly relating Muslim polygamy to benefit exploitation since at least 2000. If we understand the reception of this current article in this context, we can begin to see why *Mail Online* readers are so ready to assume "benefit sponging" at the mere mention of a Muslim polygamous family. Given the controversy, one also wonders why the article chose not to mention that Mr. Phillips explicitly stated that he does not receive benefits.

### Muslim polygamy and benefits should be mutually exclusive

The disapproval towards being in a polygamous union while simultaneously receiving state benefits was expressed not only from the point of view of the British taxpayer, but also from an Islamic standpoint. As the following comments would suggest, a number of users saw an inherent contradiction between the ethics of Islam regarding polygyny and state dependency:

*Sharia law permits more than one wife if the husband can house and support them. These men should never claim any benefits. 28+ 2-*

*...The other women are classed as single mothers (in order to claim benefits most probably) however if they are doing so then they are breaking Islamic laws as well. In order to qualify for having second/third/fourth wives the man must be able to keep his wife/children...if he relies on the welfare state i.e. society than he shouldn't be getting married and the women are fools. 61+ 4-*

*Benefits? These men are supposed to be able to afford to keep their wives. That is part of their Law. Some different Law in England, is there? 350+ 12-*

The comments here, and their arrowed-reactions from other users, seem to imply that many British people may not have an inherent problem with polygamy, provided that provisions for polygamous families are self-funded. I chose to include arrow ratings on this occasion to show that all comments in this section were positively rated. Another comment that read, "*allow polygamy but subject to the benefit cap as one family*" was green arrowed 20 times and red arrowed 7 times. This might better explain the previous contention regarding consent, allowing us to understand that it is not necessarily the case that readers have objections to

people consenting to polygamous unions, but only insofar as they are exploiting the benefits system in doing so.<sup>86</sup>

In a previous *Guardian* article addressing the *burqa*, we saw evidence in support of Allport's (1954) hypothesis that contact between groups (under certain conditions) can reduce prejudice and intergroup conflict. A non-Muslim woman who conceded previous prejudiced opinions towards women wearing the face-veil had positively changed her perspective upon interacting with such women in professional environments. No such examples nor anecdotes appear in any of the articles addressing Muslim polygamy. This is possibly due to the fact that unlike the wearing of the face-veil, which, upon coming into contact with such a person becomes an obvious identity marker, men and women in polygamous marriages may not reveal their marriage arrangement to others (especially non-Muslims). Thus people have far less opportunities to have Allport's contact hypothesis tested with regards to attitudes to Muslim polygamy. As a result, the gap between the virtual and actual social identity remains wide (Goffman 1963), and people are more likely to continue to hold stereotypical views about scrounging Muslim polygamists. Indeed, the creation of such negative stereotypes is a predictor of both realistic and symbolic threats (Stephan et al 2009).

### **The Guardian I**

An article by Brian Whitaker, "[\*Warsi wades in\*](#)" addresses Baroness Warsi's complaints about Muslim polygamy being allowed to occur in the UK. Whitaker takes the opposite view arguing, "If a man wants to have more than one wife, or a woman to have more than one husband, and everyone enters into the arrangement openly and voluntarily, what exactly is wrong with that?" He adds that it is "hard to see why she's getting so steamed up about it", and estimates that there are fewer than 1,000 polygamous marriages in Britain<sup>87</sup> compared to tens of millions of monogamous ones, and therefore, the issue shouldn't be considered a major problem. The article was responded to with 206 comments, many of which were thoroughly integrated in discussion and often heated debate about the legalisation of polygamy in the UK.

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<sup>86</sup> The comments raise an important point that has been recognised in Muslim countries, at least in principle, where the law on polygamy is concerned. In Iraq, for example, marriage to more than one wife is permitted by a judge who ensures the condition "that the husband is financially capable of supporting more than one wife" (Art. 3 para. 4 in Nasir 2009: 67). Syrian (Art. 17) and Jordanian (Art. 12) law also require proof that the husband can financially support more than one wife. Other countries give the wife reason for divorce if a man fails to keep up levels of financial support initially agreed at the outset of marriage (Nasir 2009).

<sup>87</sup> The estimation here is for those conducted legally abroad, not ones carried out in the UK, legally unrecognised.

As with previous comparisons, comments in the *Guardian*, were generally longer, more refined, more informed, and more nuanced than comments from the *Mail Online*. Much of the debate about polygamy was not directly relevant to impressions of Islam and Muslims but as we shall see, users' attitudes to polygamy in general did influence their attitudes to Muslim polygamy and vice versa. The article was chosen due to its interesting and nuanced angle whereby a liberal, white, non-Muslim man defends polygamy, even in an Islamic context, to other left-leaning readers.

### Sexist, patriarchal and exploitative

While a fair amount of authors seemed to agree with Whitaker, the general sway of comments ultimately disagreed, pointing out that there was indeed something wrong with allowing polygamy because it was a sexist cultural practice which degraded women. This emphasis on female degradation was also true of comments in the *Guardian* article which addressed the Channel 4 documentary. On multiple occasions, Muslim polygamy was categorised among honour killings, forced marriages and female circumcision, marking the recurring symbolic threat to British values (Stephan et al 2009). This is an interesting difference from *Mail Online* readers who primarily argued against Muslim polygamy by emphasising illegality and benefit-sponging rather than female oppression. Indeed, benefit sponging was hardly mentioned at all by *Guardian* readers, which concurs with Baker et al's (2013) corpus study showing that 'Muslims on benefits' had little no 'news value' in left-leaning broadsheets. Baker et al (2013) link this to the socio-economic profile of tabloid and broadsheet readers, arguing that poorer readers may feel more sensitive about who should be receiving benefits. Given that the *Guardian* is a left-leaning paper, many commenters condemned polygamy while signalling their otherwise liberal views:

*In **theory**, I have nothing against people loiving their sexual and romantic lives as they want to : open marriages, celibacy, whatever rocks your boat only if everyone involved has absolutely freely made that choice. In **practice** however, polygamy has always benefited males and has always reinforced patriarchy. You might mention two or three isolated communities in Nepal who are practising polyandry, but really, we both know what the deal is. So, sorry, no.*

*I'd have less problem with polygamy if three people fell in love and that was decided. The problem is that it;'s a sexist cultural tradition that is causing this choice. Similarly with the Burka, people aren't walking up and thinking that looks nice, must see what it looks like on.*

*Anyone can live in any menage a deux, trois or even dix (gender balance to taste, though no minors or animals as partners), and can even make legal contracts between themselves on matters of property and inheritance. And in my libertarian way I am entirely happy with that. I am also happy that civil partnership has been added to marriage as an option for legally and socially recognised unions, and think gay couples*

*should be able to adopt. But I would not go any further, because in both marriage and civil partnership we recognise the principle of mutuality (and these days full equality) of partners. Polygamous or the much rarer polyandrous marriages simply cannot be fully mutual in this way...I think there is a good case for saying that while monogamy can be exploitative, polygamy is intrinsically exploitative (nearly all documentary evidence shows that women tend to dislike it even in societies where it is accepted)*

It is clear here that the main thread of argument within these comments is the assumed, oppressive inequality of such arrangements. Concurringly, Baker et al (2013) had also found an emphasis on women's rights in broadsheet reporting on Muslim polygamy compared to that of tabloid papers.<sup>88</sup> While commenters do not mention Islam explicitly (perhaps carefully so?), it is almost certain that the Muslim practice of polygyny is in mind. It would not be too rash to assume that if Muslim polygyny did not have such a bad reputation, the attitude towards polygamy being legalised in the UK would not be so negative among *Guardian* readers. Inequality and exploitation of women are here used to override Whitaker's liberal "openly and voluntarily" principle, calling into question the degree to which women actually consent to such arrangements:

#### Not real consent

*I understand your reasoning that if all parties consent freely to a polygamous relationship then there is no problem - but we live in the real world here, not lala land where everyone has freedom of choice. The majority of women in polygamas marriages are not in it out of consent. They may have not been directly forced into a polygamas marriage but out of implicit pressure from family and society back home. I doubt there are very few first wives who would freely consent to their husband taking a second wife.*

*This article's ignorance and arrogance is unbelievable! So, this practise where many women including young girls were forced into such polygamous marriage, and it's based on sustaining inequality and injustice between men and women's rights (women are not allowed to practise it and and that's also a big problem, thus women are considered as inferior beings!), doesn't seem to matter to this male writer!*

*second wives are often young women subjected to arranged even forced marriages to older men whom they would not have chosen left to themselves... When one reads of women's groups trying against heavy opposition to prevent the reintroduction of rights of polygamy for men (e.g, in parts of Indonesia??), it is honestly a bit sickening to hear Western defences of polygamy that are based on Western assumptions of female autonomy that are simply irrelevant in context*

*As for those entering into these sort of arrangements 'voluntarily' I wonder what kind of perverse worldview Brian holds. Polygamy only exists for the benefit of privileged males in oppressive hierachical societies, where women are manipulated and coerced into subservience. This article can only have been intended as an intellectual experiment to defend the indefensible, and it has of course failed.*

The arguments here adopt a similar angle to earlier comments regarding whether or not women actually choose to cover their face, or, are they 'brainwashed'/'trained like dogs' to do

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<sup>88</sup> Albeit this was substantiated by one example in the *Telegraph*: "How this can be squared with the Government's rhetoric of commitment to women's rights is beyond us: it is a quite clear incitement to the humiliating and blatantly unjust practice of allowing men, but only men, to take more than one spouse (Sunday Telegraph, 3 February 2008)" (Baker et al 2013: 194).



so. Others highlighted the economic poverty of such women or their inability to even speak English, thus further emphasising their apparent lack of agency. This interrogation over the *real* nature of a person's consent to such practices is a critical point within such debates, often polarising discussion. On the one hand, you have those who assume that such women - even if they appear to enter such arrangements willingly - are systematically indoctrinated from a young age that women are subservient to men; as one user puts it, "*brainwashed to believe that is their place in life*". Hence, their apparent freedom of choice to adopt certain practices within such a sexist system is seen as void. This is, of course, reminiscent of early colonial discourses which invalidated and sought to eradicate local practices of non-western societies from a position of cultural superiority (Said 1995, Massad 2007). On the other hand, there are those who argue that all adults, in the absence of direct coercion, should be assumed to be making free choices of their own will. One (male) commenter expressed this point as follows:

There never has been a way of ensuring that *anyone* entering *any* kind of contract is not coerced against their will. We assume for the purposes of law and policy that people are free agents making their own decisions. There is simply no other way of organising society, other than assuming we are all children or imbeciles who cannot decide for ourselves... I have absolutely no idea what the people involved in these households think of their own situation. Maybe someone should ask them, rather than just assuming they are helpless, entrapped, abused little victims without any kind of free will and agency?<sup>89</sup>

As with the argument with the face-veil, the issue of consent led to a fairly even polarisation of attitudes, both (paradoxically) championing principles of liberalism. However, feminism appeared to play a bigger role on the side that questioned the notion of a woman's consent. Indeed, such comments appeared to come mainly from women who seemed to empathise more with Muslim women, while the main supporters of Whitaker appeared to be men. The empathy might be misplaced in some contexts, however. El-Nawawy and Khamis (2009) survey an online thread from Islamonline.net discussing polygamy in Islam, made up predominantly of Muslim women who were not critical of polygyny. On the contrary, they saw the following of God's laws as an empowering virtue, provided, of course, that the man was 'just', 'fair' and a 'good practicing Muslim'. Not without oxymoronic implications for many of the female writers for this *Guardian* article, el-Nawawy and Khamis call this approach "Islamic feminism" (el-Nawawy and Khamis 2009: 189). The focus on polygamy being harmful and exploitative towards women appears to continue a theme of emphasis from Victorian writers who were also influenced by discourses of (European) feminism (Ahmed 1992). This differs from medieval writers on Muslim polygamy who paid less regard to female well-being and

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<sup>89</sup> Not italicized to show his own emphases.



placed more emphasis on the lustful decadence of Islam<sup>90</sup> (Daniel 1993). The difference, however is in the lack of 'liberalism' amongst Victorian writers who, unlike *Guardian* readers here, would be far less likely to condone consensual polygamy in principle.

## **The Guardian II**

The negative and sometimes emotionally charged attitudes against polygamy was somewhat surprising in light of comments from another *Guardian* article which also addressed polygamy in the muslim context. "[\*Polygamy for all\*](#)", by Khaled Diab considers the controversial question of a Saudi journalist, Nadine al-Bedair: "if Muslim men are entitled to marry up to four wives, why can't women, in the spirit of equality between believers, have four husbands?" The original author had argued her point from cultural relevance, claiming that the social context in which polygamy made rational sense in early Muslim societies - such as looking after widows and divorcees who are financially dependent, and the inability to tell who the biological father was - are no longer relevant. The *Guardian* article goes on to discuss some reactions of Muslims officials to the article, which varied in tone. Some had attacked al-Bedair for her proposal, few defended her emphasising how men exploit polygamy, and some claimed that polygamy should be banned altogether. Diab then comes to a very pertinent question: "which is fairer and more equitable – monogamy or polygamy for all?" Given that marriage is in general decline in the western world, Diab feels that if it should survive as an institution, it should be made flexible enough to enable people to alter it according to their needs. This would primarily mean decriminalizing bigamy; the act of marrying another person while being already married.

Unlike the comment section for the previous article, friendly and civil debates were sparked as to whether polygamy was a positive type of marital union in and of itself, detached from the article's Islamic context. Once again, there was hardly any mention of 'benefit sponging' from these commenters, which suggests that this was not a cognitive model influencing *Guardian* readers. There was very little objection to Nadine al-Bedair's demand for polygamous equality in Islamic law. Many comments praised al-Bedair for how brave she was to make such a demand in what is perceived to be a highly misogynistic culture. The article yielded 329

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<sup>90</sup> This is likely due to the fact that feminism did not flourish until the 19th century, bearing little to no influence on medieval thinking. Yet it had a great amount of influence on Victorian thinking, especially with regards to eastern women (Ahmed 1992)

comments. However, only a minority of comments related to attitudes towards Muslims specifically.

### In favour of polygamy

The responses that gave a clear indication as to whether the commenter favoured the idea of polygamy for all, or favoured monogamy, were fairly evenly split. Unlike the heated debates of the last *Guardian* article, often such comments were presented in humour, indicating how lightly and positively the idea was taken:

*Blimey, four husbands? Sign me up, provided the fellows don't come complete with mothers-in-law and all.*

*wives with 4 husbands.?? from a male perspective it sounds a splendid idea.... More time for fishing ...can we make it universal ??*

*Well, at last! It is long overdue - to allow polyandry (multiple husbands). I need four, I deserve four. Ever since gays have been saying that their civil right is to have a man-wife or woman-husband, I've been thinking that i should demand more than one husband. Why? Because it is perfectly sensible with today's DNA testing. <sup>11</sup>My children would certainly know which of my several husbands is their biological father, due to the efficacy of DNA testing. There would certainly be fewer divorces because I would have no reason to cheat on my four husbands and they could easily have other affairs and I would hardly miss them. <sup>12</sup>Sharing finances, we'd do very well. <sup>13</sup>If, say, one husband did want to divorce me, would I be able to survive with just three husbands remaining? I think I could manage.*

*Three other blokes to share the blame for everything? Sounds good to me.*

*A quarter of the nagging, a quarter of the chores, a quarter of the bills, probably the same amount of sex... the idea has mileage.*

The humorous comments cannot always be taken as evidence that the commenter actually considers legalised polygamy to be a good idea. Such users may merely be using the platform and context to make a joke. However, the sincerity of other commenters was made clearer by their rational justifications:

*One rule for all would be best but.... with the population of the globe running out of control it makes sense for women to have many husbands to support a few children as opposed to men having many wives and getting them all pregnant at the same time producing far too many children.*

*Historically, polygamy had little to do with religion, but reflected societies where the men went out to war and the ladies stayed at home... There should be some evidence that there is a shortage of one sex or the other before either polygamy or polyandry should be permitted.*

*As I was given to understand, polygyny in Islam came about because there was constant war in those parts, resulting in a larger proportion of women to men. The system was an attempt to ensure that every woman had a husband (and the chance to have children). The men were enjoined to treat their wives equally, no favouritism in any way. Customs often outlive their usefulness.*

It is noteworthy that some (supposed) non-Muslim commenters here appear to be making rational justifications for polygamy, and even for Islamic polygamy. This is somewhat similar

to earlier rational justification made for the *niqab* being a protection against sandstorms in desert environments. Despite the inaccuracy<sup>91</sup> of the idea that Islam allows polygamy because of the shortage of men due to wars etc., it is another important and rare example of how an Islamic practice which is otherwise negatively perceived, is justified by non-Muslims with rational argument.

### Polygamy exploited by Muslim men

Only a small number of comments on this occasion specifically addressed the concern of polygamy as directly relating to the abuse of women by Muslim men:

*One of the nastier aspects of polygamy is that rich Arabs from the Gulf exploit this provision by essentially purchasing the daughters of impoverished countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh to add to their collection of wives. It should be pointed out that polygamy is largely shunned and is quite rare among Muslims today, not that there is anything fundamentally problematic about it as long as it is a decision reached between consenting adults.*

*With four husbands no Muslim wife would have a minute to herself. It would be gangbangs every night, and fights over whose turn it was to be on top. There would be four times the amount of food to be cooked, and four times the amount of dishes to be washed, and four times the bullshit she'd have to put up with - day in and day out, until only an early death could eventually free her.*

*In Muslim countries, polygamy is specifically connected to the power and privilege of men. Hence the horror if polyandry is suggested.*

Again, these comments were nowhere near as prevalent compared to previous article. It is somewhat curious that two *Guardian* articles addressing Muslim polygamy appeared to give rise to very different 'spirited' discussions. The previous article produced comments that were overall very serious in tone with much heated debate. Comments for this discussion also had many serious points yet there was a prevalent amount of humour to break up the intensity and lighten the discussion. The current article only succeeds the previous article by a year so this cannot be due to overall shifts in discourse and perception. What is more likely is

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<sup>91</sup> Gender ratio imbalance is considered to be a 'superficial' factor for polygyny by a number of thinkers. 'Abd al 'Atī (1977) contends that there is no necessary connection between low sex ratio and polygyny, as there are many societies which demonstrate one without the other. Miriam Zeiten (2008) also identifies the cause of polygyny away from gender ratio of a population and focuses more on the disparity between the marital ages of each gender. According to Zeiten, polygyny implies a delay in marriage for men who are required to remain bachelors for a number of years. The delaying of marriage for younger men creates a surplus of young women who are married to older men. So it is not so much the case that polygyny results from surplus women in the entire population (in fact, Zeiten claims that most polygamous societies have a relatively balanced gender ratio) rather, the surplus is to do with young men tending to delay marriage in order to establish their social standing, which creates a surplus of marriageable women. This 'age system' of marriage is typical to many African polygynous societies as well as Arab/Islamic societies (Rashad et al 2009). When an imbalance of gender ratio does occur as a result of armed conflict, however, the rate of polygyny tends to increase, albeit, temporarily. A gender imbalance might therefore only lead to higher rates of polygyny in an already polygynous society, and not be a cause for polygyny. The commenters were therefore correct in identifying gender ratio as a factor in polygamous societies, though they were less accurate in how this was configured.

how each article frames the discussion. Perhaps most significantly, this article talks about an Arab *woman* demanding polygamy for women in the name of equality, challenging Muslim patriarchal structures. Contrastingly, the former article consists of a white liberal man asking, ‘what’s wrong with polygamy if all consent?’ The difference might be subtle but users with strong feminist inclinations have far less grounds of complaint when a woman is demanding gender equality, whereas a man asking for unisex polygamy can potentially be (and was) seen as a support of patriarchal structures and male-privilege.

### Conclusion

Muslim polygamy is still seen as something reprehensible by our sample of the British public, but reasons for this have changed according to new political and social factors which now colour the discourse. The symbolic and, especially, realistic threat of Muslim polygyny is exclusive to the modern context in which both social groups share the same social space (Stephan and Stephan 2000). Conversely, pre-modern critics of Islam were commenting on a culture that was at great geographical distance from their own. Thus the threat of imminent cultural/legal ‘takeover’ and its corresponding public frustration was in no way present as it is today. Concurringly, Baker et al (2013) point out that Muslims of the nineteenth century could not be represented as ‘scroungers’ as the UK did not have a welfare state at the time (Baker et al 2013: 252). Such threats have typically given rise to a range of negative stereotypes (Stephan and Stephan 2000). Prior to western modernity, there was hardly a conceived form of a marital union outside a monogamous marriage between a man and a woman. Today, the question of polyandry is a recurring response to the issue of Muslim polygyny. The decline of religious authority, combined with a growth in the championing of rationality, gender equality, and individual choice, has formulated a relationship ethos that values equality and adult consent over religious doctrine. Many commenters, indeed, expressed an acceptance for polygamy and even for Muslim polygamy as long as the adults were consenting and happy. However, the notion of this consent was heavily called into question, reflecting the “genuine choice vs. brainwashed choice” debate, which was not unique to this chapter.

Variations between news sources were more distinct than for previous chapters. *Mail Online* readers highlighted illegality and benefit scrounging, while *Guardian* readers emphasised

women's degradation. The latter seemed largely unbothered by the benefits issue. Gender distinctions, although not an intentional research point for this investigation, were hard to avoid in this instance. Female *Guardian* readers were more likely to argue against the universalization of polygamy, being critical of the practice primarily benefiting men at the expense of women, whereas men seemed to argue for universal polygamy in principle, detached from supposed undesirable experiences of women.

Symbolic threats were of two major but interrelated kinds. One, as discussed, is that Muslim polygyny is an inherent offence to women. The other, of which the former is a part, is the wider breaking down of British values which primarily emphasises the fear of Sharia law in the UK. It is noteworthy that this fear was not as prevalent in the attitudes of *Guardian* readers as it was for *Mail Online* readers. This might be partly explained by Baker et al's (2013) suggestion regarding poorer non-Muslim communities in the UK being more sensitive about their social status. It might also be more simply to do with the fact the *Daily Mail* and *Mail Online* have a history of fear-mongering regarding the Muslim presence in Britain (Baker et al 2013).

The benefits issue posed a significant realistic threat for *Mail Online* readers. Such a critique falls into an already prevalent theme within the *Daily Mail*/*Mail Online* which associates Muslims with benefit scrounging, giving the topic an already primed audience. The perceived unequal status of Muslims with regards to marital laws compared to non-Muslims was also one of the most prevalent reactions observable from *Mail Online* users, predicting a high level of prejudiced attitudes according to Allport's contact hypothesis. This was coupled with another predictor of prejudice in the form of a perceived lack of institutional support from the British government who were considered 'weak'. The symbolic/cultural threat was also clearly perceived by users who felt that Britain was losing its identity to the culture of a minor group. This was fed into the also already-established anti-Muslims sentiment of 'sharia takeover' in Britain. Such threats are not observable in every case where a minority culture exists amongst a dominant group of a different culture (Stephan et al 2000). More research could perhaps confirm that this 'high symbolic threat of the minority' is unique to Muslim populations in majority non-Muslim countries.

## Chapter 7: Paedophilia

The accusation that the Prophet Muhammad was a paedophile is one of the most morally disturbing criticisms of Islam for non-Muslims to produce and for Muslims to receive.<sup>92</sup> Along with condemning the religion for being homophobic, it is also one of the most recent. The criticism belongs to a prominent and consistent subject of attack within anti-Islamic discourse; namely, details of the Prophet's sexual and married life (Hopwood 1999, Brown 2014). The default orthodox narrative as recorded in the most authoritative Islamic traditions (and from Aisha herself) is that the Prophet Muhammad was betrothed to Aisha when she was 6 years old and married when she was 9, while the Prophet would have been around 54 years of age. The age disparity in modern times is seen by critics of Islam as a moral disgrace, especially for that of a Prophet of God believed to be an example to humanity. Like Muslim polygamy, the issue also poses both symbolic and realistic threats within British society (Stephan et al 2009). Marriage of older men to younger girls poses a symbolic threat in terms of being yet another patriarchal practice that is oppressive to women and antithetical to the values of relationship equality and consent. While actual abuse and harm of children, particularly white girls at the hands of 'Muslim' men<sup>93</sup>, poses a realistic threat inducing further hostility towards the outgroup. There is no interest here to address the actual age of Aisha upon marrying the Prophet as is commonly contended in modern debates on the issue (Ali 2006). Rather, we are primarily concerned with the nature of current criticism, with how it may have changed and developed, as well as how it may influence other criticisms of Muslims.

As well as being one of the most recent criticisms against the Prophet of Islam, it is also one of the most politically sensitive. Casual attacks of paedophilia towards the Prophet of Islam has sometimes led to individuals losing their jobs and positions.<sup>94</sup> In order to understand how the perspective on the issue moved from a pre-Victorian silence (and sometimes, apologetic justification), to one of the most inflammatory and popular attacks towards Islam in the 21st century, it is crucial to take a brief historical look at a number of social and conceptual

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<sup>92</sup> In that many contemporary Muslims themselves struggle with the issue within their own faith (Ali 2006).

<sup>93</sup> In the case of paedophile gangs notorious in mainland England: "FactCheck: what do we know about grooming gangs?" *Channel 4 News*, Aug 28 2014:: <http://blogs.channel4.com/factcheck/factcheck-grooming-gangs/18739>

<sup>94</sup> For example, "Radio star dropped for calling Prophet Muhammad a paedophile" *The Guardian* June 29 2014 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/29/radio-star-dropped-for-calling-prophet-muhammed-a-paedophile> and "Teacher To Be Prosecuted For Calling Mohammed Child Molester", *Breitbart*, May 11 2016 <http://www.breitbart.com/london/2016/05/11/teacher-prosecuted-calling-mohammed-child-molester/>

changes that have occurred in the western context. These include shifting notions of consent, developments within the understanding of “childhood”, as well as the emergence and vilification of the category, “the paedophile.”

### Shifting Consent

Consent factors heavily into the modern critique of the Prophet’s marriage to Aisha, yet consent as a concept and social principle is in no way singular and static. Throughout history, each society may vary in the degree to which individual consent is both valued and limited (Laiou 1993). These degrees are also heavily influenced by surrounding socio-political and religious factors, such as concepts of honour and shame (particularly relating to issues of a sexual nature), social status of relevant parties involved (free/unfree, minor/adult, male/female), and embedded cultural norms and expectations. Such factors vary in significance in different societies producing an array of cultural and legal formulations surrounding consent in marriage and sex. Modern laws regarding rape and adultery, for example, are distinguished clearly by the line of consent. Indeed, in the modern western world, consent and force of the individuals involved have become the dominant ways of dictating sexual offences.<sup>95</sup> For the pre-modern world, however, lines were not always so clear cut. In ancient Greece and Rome, other factors such as slavery, patriarchy with its effect on the sexual capacity of women, and pederasty, render modern clear cut notions of consent and force not always applicable (Cohen 1993). While consent was relevant to the free women in most cases to distinguish between adultery and rape, sexual relations with a slave placed more emphasis on the consent of the slave owner. In such pre-modern societies, this rendered a consensual marriage between two slaves a punishable crime if without the consent of the slave-girl’s owner (Wemple 1993).

Gratian’s *Decretum*, a 12th century foundational text for European medieval legislation, was one of the first treatments of marriage laws to emphasise the notion of consent, establishing the western focus (Winroth 2009). But at the time, this did not concern that of the bride and groom alone. Consent of the bride’s father, irrespective of age, was explicitly mentioned as necessary for the validity of a marriage in a later version of the text, and marriages of unfree

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<sup>95</sup> And, increasingly, marital offences. Hence the legal and moral inevitability of gay marriage and current appeal for polygamous marriages in the modern western world. Arguments are often driven by the notion of consent. Conversely, hence the logical horror of paedophilia, seeing a child’s consent is seen as void.

person's - agricultural serfs and slaves - were stated as only being possible with the consent of their owners (Winroth 2009). There was a continued tension in following centuries between individual and family interest, however, as the law sought to "prevent families from using their children as mere pawns in the game of dynastic aggrandisement or property accumulation" (Ingram 1987: 135). Nevertheless, throughout England and other parts of Europe in the 16th and 17th century, it was universally agreed upon that children getting married needed the consent of their parents (Ingram 1987). While the minimum legal age for marriage was 12 for women and 14 for men, it was permissible for couples to be betrothed at the age of 7 with the right to dissent when they reached the full age of marriage. Child marriages of this sort were said to be quite common in north-west England but probably rarer in other parts (Ingram 1987). From this historical perspective, the Prophet's marriage to Aisha was less dramatically distant in its sociological underpinnings.

Betrothal and marriage of children in pre-modern Arabia was often explained by the desire for people to draw closer together through familial integration ('Abd al 'Ati 1977). Islam in particular set no age limits on betrothal or marriage. Aisha is said to have been married and in the house of the Prophet at 9, while the companion of the Prophet, Amr bin al Aas, is said to have had his first son at 11.<sup>96</sup> 'Abd al 'Ati (1977) argues that seeing as the revealed law regards those below the age of puberty as devoid of moral responsibility, the child in this framework has no valid consent to give or withhold. This permits the father or guardian, who it is assumed will act in the best interest of their child, to arrange a marriage to a person they deem worthy. Though according to many jurists, upon maturity - as in Medieval English law - the young spouse may uphold or annul the marriage that was conducted before the age of consent, emphasising that the interest of the child is a focal point of the law ('Abd al 'Ati 1977).

Today, "child marriage" is of course seen as something morally grotesque. Despite being a prevalent practice of many cultures and religions in the past, it is difficult, from our standards, to see how it could have ever been socially acceptable. This has much to do with the marital norms of today, the importance we now place on consent, as well as the universalization and dominance of the construction that "childhood" is strictly a marriage-free period of vulnerable innocence and dependency.

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<sup>96</sup> [http://library.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display\\_book.php?idfrom=285&idto=285&bk\\_no=60&ID=244](http://library.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display_book.php?idfrom=285&idto=285&bk_no=60&ID=244) "وليس أبوه أكبر منه إلا بأحدى" "عشرة سنة أو نحو" "And his father was not older than him except by 11 years or so."



## Social Construction of Childhood

“Childhood” as a social construction has been one of the ways in which the subject of childhood has been approached in recent decades (Ariès 1962, Heywood 2001, Cunningham 2006). This is the idea that how we understand “children” (or people of younger years) may vary dramatically between different societies and change throughout different times. The biological fact of immaturity is consistent in all “children” worldwide, yet how this immaturity is understood is decided by the prevailing culture. Heywood (2001: 4) claims, for example, that “[t]oday in the West we do indeed generally associate childhood with such characteristics as innocence, vulnerability and asexuality, whilst people in, say, the slums of Latin America or a war-torn region of Africa, will probably not do so.” Cross-cultural and cross-time studies and comparisons have continued to inform the social constructionist approach to childhood, though not without raising important questions of moral relativity.

It is perhaps of little coincidence that Jonathan Brown’s (2014: 144) claim that “no instance of anyone criticizing the Prophet’s marriage due to Aisha’s age or accusing him of paedophilia until the early twentieth century” reflects developments in the understanding of childhood, particularly in England and Europe at a similar time from where such criticisms rose. Historical evidence from the early Middle Ages regarding children often indicates a significant difference from how they are perceived today. Child monks and nuns of Catholicism, common throughout Europe and in Anglo-Saxon England from the 6th century onwards, appeared to support the idea that children were miniature adults in some contexts. In other parts of England, boys as young as ten were considered old enough to manage their own land (Kuefler 1991). However, a psychological distinction identifying youth as a transitional period of learning, requiring care and attention was still often acknowledged in references to youth at the time (Cunningham 2006). Still, we find rational justifications as to why children, particularly in service of the Church, were superior to adults in certain ways. It was argued by King Alfred’s biographer, Asser, that children were sometimes the only people to volunteer for monastic service since they had not yet developed the hunger for materialistic pursuits (Kuefler 1991). In the late sixth century, St. Columban also outlined further reasons why a child was better suited for the spiritual station than an adult in that, “he does not persist in anger; he does not bear a grudge; he takes no delight in the beauty of women; and he

expresses what he truly believes.”<sup>97</sup> Another quality ascribed to children over adults was their ability to learn at a faster rate. Thus, as Heywood contends, “the notion that ‘innocence’ and ‘weakness’ are fundamental truths about childhood rather than one such construct is deeply suspect” (Heywood 2001: 20).

Although criticised for overstating his case (Taylor 1997, Heywood 2001), French Historian Philippe Ariès (1962) was fundamental in arguing for the social construction of childhood in the western world. He considered the fact that children in European medieval art were often depicted as miniature adults wearing the same clothes as adults but on a smaller scale. Lack of formal education and widespread illiteracy at the time also meant that degrees of education were not socially dividing factors between children and adults. Instead, children from the age of around 7 were predominantly well integrated into the adult world, not entirely estranged from the realms of politics, sex, work, and culture. Muncie (2009: 48) similarly maintains that “in pre-industrial societies children mingled with adults in everyday life, in work, in leisure and in sport to a far greater degree than they might do today.” This sometimes included drinking alcohol, smoking, gambling, and, often, engagement in manual work. As Ariès argues, a child up to the end of the Middle Ages did not study a specific trade or occupation before entering it, rather, he “acquired the necessary knowledge through everyday practice, from living and working with adults who were already fully trained” (Ariès 1962: 192). Within this pre-modern context, children were allowed to marry but only with the consent of their parents (Ingram 1987), hence the general medieval silence on the Prophet’s Marriage to Aisha from critics of Islam at the time (Brown 2014).

Moral, legal and educational shifts would soon make the distinction between children and adults more acute. Influences of Renaissance humanism and moralists of the Protestant Reformation helped to develop the ‘morality of childhood’ as a tender and fragile age requiring protection but also, regulation and discipline (Muncie 2009). The idea was that a child needed systematic training, “a sort of quarantine” before joining adults (Ariès 1962). “By the end of the eighteenth century a vision of the ideal child had been developed and widely projected – a child who was dependent, submissive to authority, obedient, modest, hard-working and chaste” (Muncie 2009: 49). Factory Acts of the early 19th century then began to legislate restrictions for young workers, and forbade mill and factory work for anyone below

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<sup>97</sup> Cited in Heywood (2001) p. 21

the age of 9. Around the same time, distinctions were increasingly being made in criminal law for special treatment of juvenile offenders who were previously punished like adults (Bradley 2008). In the 18th century, a child from the age of 7 could be executed for various felonies including theft (Cunningham 2006)<sup>98</sup> which implied an acknowledgment of personal agency in youth. By the 19th century, this was overturned. Juvenile “prisons” and reformatories, which took a far softer approach, increased and were common by the mid 19th century (Muncie 2009). Such legislation assumed the innocence and fragility of the child. Moreover, in the late 19th century, compulsory elementary schooling up to the age of 10 in England and Wales further separated children from the adult world and systematically institutionalised childhood within an age-tier education system. This was reinforced by the emergence of professionals specialising in the unique “needs” of children, such as paediatricians, child psychiatrists, educational psychologists and child social workers. All these professions assumed that children were a distinct category of human beings, not fully developed, and in need of much protection and guidance (Taylor 1997). Indeed, Ariès (1962: 411) maintained that unlike the Middle Ages, the modern world “is obsessed by the physical, moral and sexual problems of childhood.”<sup>99</sup> The conception of childhood that would eventually reign supreme was a distinctly middle class, aristocratic notion of childhood which afforded a life of leisure, discipline and play (Bradley 2008, Muncie 2009). For the working class, the need to render children economically active as soon as possible was more important than the focus on prolonged periods of childhood training and dependency (Muncie 2009).

It is interesting how 19th century orientalist accounts of the Prophet Muhammad’s marriage to Aisha appear to fit, at least superficially, with such shifts in English and European laws and social ideas regarding childhood. Brown (2014) notes that although the Prophet’s marriage to Aisha features in some medieval polemical writings against Islam, criticisms were less to do with the age disparity and more to do with his alleged lusts in general, being “noted for an amorous temperament” (Irving 1850: 110). Brown also notes that the earlier criticisms were decidedly English - England being one of the first countries make the move from an

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<sup>98</sup> However, it was not a linear development of progression. Previously, in early 10th century Anglo-Saxon England, only those over 12 could be punished as an adult (Cunningham 2006, Kuefler 1991). The age of criminal accountability thus fluctuated throughout England’s history.

<sup>99</sup> In the modern world, the focus on childhood has grown exponentially. Forms of education, culture, and lifestyle, further polarise the gap between children and adults. Some of these have a capitalist imperatives, such as films, TV shows, songs, theme parks, toys, activities, and even foods intended *exclusively* for children.

agricultural to an industrial economy leading to much social change.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, English common law was the first in Europe to establish statutory rape laws and ages of consent (Brown 2014). Nevertheless, in general, Christian writers in the Victorian age appeared to view the Prophet's marriage to Aisha with much less repulsion and hostility than today. William Muir, writing in the late 19th Century who, despite suggesting that the Prophet Muhammad was under satanic influence, addresses his marriage to Aisha with a positive and endearing quality:

"For some time, we may suppose that the girl of ten or eleven years of age would require at the hands of Mahomet the solicitude of a father, rather than the devotion of a husband. He conformed to the infantine ideas of his bride who carried her playthings with her to her new abode; and at times he even joined in her childish games. But Ayesha was premature in the development of her charms, as well as in mind as person. Very early she displayed a ready wit with an arch and playful vivacity of manner. She enthralled the heart of Mahomet; and, though afterwards exposed to the frequent competition of fresh rivals, she succeeded in maintaining to the end of his life her supremacy undisputed." (Muir 1878:187)

Anglican orientalist writer Edward Sell, in his biography of the Prophet also avoids criticism of the marriage to Aisha, emphasising her virtues of being "a very strong minded woman" who had great power over her devoted husband. He subverts any sense of victimhood by explaining that after his death she had "much political influence", adding that she was "a great Traditionist", reporting 1210 narrations from the Prophet (Sell 1913: 64-65). Shifting attention to Aisha's virtues in adulthood detracts from the perception of the sexually abused child commonly perceived in modern discourse. It renders the age at which Aisha was married somewhat inconsequential to her character and ability to flourish as a human being. Not all Victorian representations were positive, however. Rev. John J. Pool in his *Studies in Mohammedanism* (1892) criticises the Prophet's marriage to Aisha by highlighting points and qualities which emphasise her vulnerability.

"Another wrong also under which women suffer in Mohammedan countries is that of early marriage. It is true that in Eastern lands girls become women sooner than in Western lands; but, all the same, the age of ten or even under is altogether too early to commence the duties, responsibilities, and trials of married life. In this matter Mohammed himself set a very bad example. His third wife, whose name was Ayesha, was a mere child of seven years when the Prophet espoused her, and she was only nine when he married her, and took her away from her father's house. It is said that the little girl had her play things in her hands when the Prophet called for her; and doubtless she carried them with her to her new home." (Pool 1892: 31-32)

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<sup>100</sup> Consider for example the account from writer Washington Irving (1850) from not quite yet industrialised America, which positively assumes love and compassion in the marriage and conveys the incident with noticeable warmth: "*Upon this wife, thus chosen in the very blossom of her years, the prophet doted more passionately than upon any of those whom he subsequently married... He now turned his eyes upon his betrothed spouse Ayesha, the beautiful daughter of Abu Beker. Two years had elapsed since they were betrothed, and she had now attained her ninth year; an infantine age it would seem, though the female form is wonderfully precocious in the quickening climates of the East. Their nuptials took place a few months after their arrival in Medina, and were celebrated with great simplicity.*" Irving, W. (1850) *Mahomet and His Successors*, pages 111, 153.

Pool here is critiquing child marriage in Muslim countries in general and points to the Prophet as setting a bad example. We can also see the passive and vulnerable construction of the child here in full effect. While the criticism is apparent, it is devoid of a pathological essence. Being attracted to prepubescent children in the Victorian era was indeed seen as a form of perversion or mental illness (Krafft-Ebing 1894). Yet while madness, insanity, and mental instability were commonly attributed to the Prophet by early Christian writers (Daniel 1993), commenters did not ascribe any mental deviance to the Prophet regarding his marriage to Aisha, even when they did not approve. At the time, of course, the age of consent for a girl to be married was still 12, and would not increase to 16 until the Ages of Marriage Act in 1929.<sup>101</sup> Yet distinctions in legal, criminal, and educational norms for children were well underway. Opinions regarding the Prophet's marriage to Aisha throughout the Victorian period, therefore, were at an early phase, yet to take the overwhelmingly negative turn that would later dominate the narrative. This appears to have much to do not only with the social, political and legal issues mentioned, but with the notorious construction of 'the paedophile' in the 20th century.

### Paedophilia: The construction of a monster

In the modern world, there is no single precise definition of paedophilia. Medical and legal practitioners, as well as academics and media professionals may all have differently nuanced understandings of paedophilia giving rise to a variety of discourses (McCartan 2011). The general and popular definition of a paedophile, however, is one who is sexually drawn to prepubescent children (under the age of 16), but the specifics of the definition are constantly shifting as a result of ongoing debates and changes being made to the criteria set out in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Points of contention include the intensity of the sexual feelings towards children (Berlin 2011), their frequency and the length of time they have existed, as well as the actual age gap between the offender and the child.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, consistent is the fact that paedophilia is a highly emotional and sensitive issue relevant to issues of child abuse, risk, and social protection.

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<sup>101</sup> The Law of Marriage in the UK: <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/lawofmarriage-/>

<sup>102</sup> Obsolete criteria for pedophilia DSM IV <http://behavenet.com/node/21512>

In his article addressing the emergence of 'the paedophile', Steven Angelides (2009: 272) argues that, like modern homosexuality, "paedophilia is a decidedly Western invention of the late nineteenth century". At the time, early paedophilia did not share the same attention as homosexuality. The perception was that paedophilia was an extremely rare sexual occurrence, and therefore did not warrant the same focus as an ontological category or sexual identity. The label did exist, but was seldom used and did not arouse the same commercial hysteria as today. Sexologists of the time were more interested in "deviations" regarding gender norms of the sexual union and less so with age disparities. In his *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1894), Krafft-Ebing dedicates a relatively small section of his work to sexual crimes with children<sup>103</sup>, claiming that they are on the rise, partly due to the relaxing of legal penalties for such crimes compared to previous centuries. He argued that sexual acts with children could either be explained as coming from the immorality of an otherwise healthy person, or from a 'perversion of instinct' which he proposed was a deeper issue denoting a pathological problem in the individual. While he claimed that the immoral perpetrator be punished, the latter offender - suffering from consistent helpless inclinations - should not be punished, but needs to be removed from society for life so as not to prey on society again (Krafft-Ebing 1894). It is interesting to note that despite Krafft-Ebing's criticisms of Islam and of the Prophet Muhammad in the opening pages of the same work, he makes no connection with the Prophet to paedophilia or to the violation of children,<sup>104</sup> further emphasising the time-bound construction of the modern criticism.

The discourse on paedophilia would intensify, however, by the late twentieth century, where the issue of age disparities between minors and adults, along with questions of consent, became more prominently in focus. In 1929, England had raised the age of marriage and sexual consent from 12 for girls, 14 for boys, to 16 for both<sup>105</sup>. This change in law signified a corresponding shift in moral attitudes since the two are fundamentally related (Schwartz 1979). By the late twentieth century, the imperative to highlight the horror of sex with children, even those who appeared to consent, was achieved not only through legal sanctions,

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<sup>103</sup> Krafft Ebing (1894) also spoke of *female* paedophilia which is not typically discussed in the present. This perhaps suggests the changing cultural formations of the discourse. In the modern construction it is almost always a male problem.

<sup>104</sup> Nor does he single out child marriage in Muslim lands, as was the case with Pool (1892). Perhaps suggestive of van Dijk's ideological square being at play with the latter. Krafft-Ebing, instead, considers the social problem of child rape in the western world noting, for instance, that "from 1851 to 1875 inclusive, 22,017 cases of rape came before the court in France, and, of these, 17,657 were committed on children." (Krafft-Ebing 1894: 397).

<sup>105</sup> The Law of Marriage in the UK: <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/lawofmarriage/>

but through the construction of members of the public who desired such activity as ‘monsters’. In a discussion with Michel Foucault and Jean Danet on “the danger of child sexuality”, philosopher and queer theorist Guy Hocquenghem (1979) claims:

There exists then a particular category of the pervert, in the strict sense, of monsters whose aim in life is to practice sex with children. Indeed they become perverts and intolerable monsters since the crime as such is recognized and constituted, and now strengthened by the whole psychoanalytical and sociological arsenal. What we are doing is constructing an entirely new type of criminal, a criminal so inconceivably horrible that his crime goes beyond any explanation, any victim.<sup>106</sup>

The criminalisation, Hocquenghem argues, is so extreme in the case of the paedophile, that its hysteria is self-perpetuating to the extent that eventually, no one even cares whether or not there was actually a victim, or if anyone was hurt. This is, of course, perpetuated by the tabloid press (Hocquenghem 1979).

Recent years have seen an increase in the “social panic” surrounding paedophilia, particularly within the last two decades (Angelides 2009). In Britain and the West in general, the current wider social discourse of paedophilia is largely constructed through media coverage, criminal cases, and continued academic and social discussion. Despite very recent attempts to humanise the sexual category<sup>107</sup>, to be accused of being a paedophile in modernity is one of the most defaming and abhorrent stigmas existing. High profile cases in the UK have included figures such as BBC radio DJ Jimmy Savile, rock artist Garry Glitter, and more recently, Australian entertainer, Rolf Harris. The allegations have tended to be fatal to the their careers and to any positive memories of their legacies. In many respects, the stigma of paedophilia is more deplorable than being labelled a murderer or even a rapist since sexual activity with a child, unlike an adult, is understood as being abuse by default insofar as valid consent is considered impossible. The understanding that the child is innately asexual and vulnerable adds to its perceived horror. A recent study surveying public stigmas towards paedophilia in comparison to other socially abhorrent groups such as alcohol abusers and sexual sadists found that people were far more negative towards people with tendencies of paedophilia than other groups (Jahnke et al 2015). Around a fifth of all participants surveyed agreed that people with paedophilia should be dead, regardless of whether or not they had ever

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<sup>106</sup> In Kritzman, Lawrence D. (ed) (1988) *Michel Foucault: politics, philosophy, culture: interviews and other writings*, New York: Routledge

<sup>107</sup> The Channel 4 documentary, *The Paedophile Next Door* (2014), took a fresh approach to paedophilia by engaging with a self-confessed paedophile for one of the first times on national television. The broadcast intended to humanise the individual who struggled with his sexual inclinations but had not acted on them.

committed their respective crime (Jahnke et al 2015). It is within this context that modern attack against the Prophet of Islam is loaded.

### [Accusing the Prophet and Islam of paedophilia in modernity](#)

The major online anti-Muslim site, [WikiIslam.net](#), opens its page on “[Islam and Pedophilia](#)” with the statement: “Pedophilia is permitted in the Qur'an, was practiced by Prophet Muhammad and his companions, and some Muslims today continue to commit the crime, following their prophet's example.” The site goes on to define paedophilia with a number of medical and academic sources, and applies them to the historical biography of the Prophet to prove such a claim. Similarly, political party, *Britain First*, also run a page, “[The undeniable link between paedophilia and Islam](#)” and claim that given the example of the Prophet, “it is no coincidence that there are such a vast number of Muslim grooming gangs across the UK.”<sup>108</sup>

The extremely deplorable nature of the label ‘paedophile’ gives it instant leverage in anti-Muslim discourse which has classically sought to vilify Islam and its founder to abhorrent extremes.<sup>109</sup> However, as we have seen, the accusation of the Prophet Muhammad being a paedophile is a relatively new abusive remark. Early criticism of the Prophet’s marriage avoided the pathological category of child abuser, despite it becoming known as a disorder (Angelides 2009, Krafft-Ebing 1894). Prior to 2001, it is difficult to find any references online to the Prophet being a paedophile. There are rare instances of pro-Christian websites which raise the marriage to Aisha issue in their assessment of Islam - especially as a comparison to Christianity, but it was certainly not as prominent as it is today. Notable is the now inactive<sup>110</sup> website [www.muhammadanism.com](#), which hosts an entire page titled, “[Aisha - 9 year-old bride](#)” (last updated in October 2000, but probably written before). The article clearly denounces the marriage, giving evidence of bodily damage in child pregnancy and claims that the Prophet Muhammad “leaves an enduring legacy for old Muslim men to fulfill their carnal desires contrary to natural law and to the life-long devastation of young girls.”<sup>111</sup> In spite of this, the term ‘paedophile’ is not used. There is evidence however, of a Muslim writing to an

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<sup>108</sup> Britain First: <https://www.britainfirst.org/the-undeniable-link-between-paedophilia-and-islam/>

<sup>109</sup> There is hardly a deplorable insult that has *not* been directed at the Prophet of Islam: Murderer, serial rapist, satanist, womaniser, barbarian, demon-possessed, etc.

<sup>110</sup> Accessed 14 Nov 2014.

<sup>111</sup> <http://www.muhammadanism.com/Hadith/Topics/Marriage.htm>



online Islam Q&A site<sup>112</sup> in April 1998 asking for scholars to clarify the Prophet's marriage to Aisha as "there have been claims on newsgroups that the Holy Prophet was a pedophile". Thus suggests, then, that the association has been around since at least the late 90s. What is likely is that the insult existed in the late 20th century, but as with other criticisms of Islam, grew significantly in the aftermath of 9/11 (Baker et al 2013). In this particular case, it seems to have paralleled the developing 'monstrous' vilification of the paedophile.

One of the first notable high-profile instances of the Prophet being called a paedophile was not long after 9/11 in June 2002 when former Southern Baptist Convention president, Rev. Jerry Vines, gave a speech at the Baptist convention in St. Louis, Missouri. Addressing his disagreement with the idea that 'religions are all the same', Rev. Vines announced that "Christianity was founded by the virgin-born Lord Jesus Christ. Islam was founded by Muhammad, a demon-possessed pedophile who had 12 wives and his last one was a 9-year-old girl."<sup>113</sup> Vines received support from fellow reverends associated with the convention, and their baptists received general praise from president Bush (Collins 2007). Soon after, televangelist, Rev. Jerry Falwell, re-ignited the accusation on CNN in the same month in a debate with director of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Hussein Ibish. On the defence, Ibish claimed that no one really knows what the age of Aisha was, and tried to immediately deter the focus onto Islam-bashing more generally.<sup>114</sup> This was a typical response from Muslim leaders and organisations who found themselves at a loss as to how to deal with the issue (Ali 2006). Another attack on the Prophet from a high-profile individual on the same issue came from Dutch MP, Geert Wilders in March 2011, who, while already facing charges of inciting race hatred, described the Prophet as an "insane, paedophile, rapist murderer".<sup>115</sup> Such high-profile cases succeed in popularising the criticism and in raising more anti-Muslim awareness of the issue. The slur has since become a prominent insult not only against the Prophet Muhammad but also against Muslims in general, particularly in light of news stories addressing paedophile grooming gangs from the Asian Muslim community in the UK. A study looking at anti-Muslim comments on Twitter found that among a number of

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<sup>112</sup> Islam Question and Answer: <https://islamqa.info/en/1493>

<sup>113</sup> Cited in Collins (2007), p.181

<sup>114</sup> "Falwell: Muhammad a pedophile, Ibish: Falwell an idiot, pt1"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQM1fSYzhiM>

<sup>115</sup> "Geert Wilders steps up anti-Islam rhetoric" *Telegraph* Mar 31 2011  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/netherlands/8419643/Geert-Wilders-steps-up-anti-Islam-rhetoric.html>

insults towards Muslims to appear, which included “Muslim scum”, “Muslim pigs” and “Muslim terrorists”, “Muslim Paedos” was the most commonly appearing insult (Awan 2014).

### Islam and Paedophilia in the media

Themes of Muslim sexual deviance have been consistent in the British press. Elizabeth Poole (2002) had examined the notorious story of Sarah Cook’s marriage to a Turkish waiter in the 90s. Sarah Cook, from Essex, was 13 when she was religiously married to Musa Komeagac having met him on holiday in Turkey. All papers categorised her as a ‘schoolgirl’ and ‘child bride’ emphasising her lack of agency and vulnerability. A *Daily Mail* article in fact mentioned Sarah as a schoolgirl four times and cited her age five times as if to appeal to a consensus on child abuse (Poole 2002). Despite appeals that all arrangements between them were mutually consensual, her Turkish lover was made out to be a rapist, oppressive and predatory. For Poole, the case belongs to a theme of Muslim-related relationships in the media, which are all “characterised by an Orientalist discourse relating to sexual deviance, primitivism, gender, generation, illegality, immorality, and perfidy (fraudulent faith), which formulate a meta-discourse of cultural incompatibility” (Poole 2002: 110). Similar stories arose within the following years featuring other underaged British girls and older Turkish men abroad.<sup>116</sup> News stories covering Muslims and paedophilia today are littered with cases of “Asian Paedophile gangs” and “grooming gangs” in the UK, notably in Rotherham. Articles cite that at least 1,400 girls have suffered abuse “at the hands of Asian men”<sup>117</sup> and point out objections from the Hindu and Sikh community for use of the term ‘Asian’ since the vast majority of these men convicted are Pakistani and Muslim.<sup>118</sup> Imams and Qur’an teachers being exposed for sexual child abuse in *madrasas* and in mosques has also featured a number of times. Non-Muslim individuals being dropped from their positions or guest appearances being cancelled for calling the Prophet a paedophile also appears newsworthy. Other articles published might be written by Muslims or Muslim sympathisers address the Prophet’s marriage to Aisha in a way intended to be palatable for western audiences.

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<sup>116</sup> “Girl will wait for jailed ‘rapist’ lover” *BBC News*, Feb 18 2003 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/2777533.stm> and “Schoolgirl, 15, found in Belgium after meeting ‘gunman’ in internet chatroom” *Daily Mail*, Aug 1 2008 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1040552/Schoolgirl-15-Belgium-meeting-gunman-internet-chatroom.html>

<sup>117</sup> “Monster returns to Rotherham: Paedophile, 26, jailed for raping 13-year-old girl after plying her with drugs is already back on the streets after serving less than four years in jail”, *Mail Online*, Aug 27 2014 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2736183/This-insult-14-000-victims-one-five-men-jailed-sex-abuse-free-police-told-hundreds-gang-members.html>

<sup>118</sup> “Top detective blasts ‘culture of silence’ that allows Asian sex gangs to groom white girls... because police and social services fear being branded racist” *Mail Online*, Jan 5 2011 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1344218/Asian-sex-gangs-Culture-silence-allows-grooming-white-girls-fear-racist.html#comments>

## Data & Discussion

Once again, despite finding two *Huffington Post* articles specifically addressing the issue of child brides and the Prophet's marriage to Aisha<sup>119</sup>, I was unable to find an article with online comments for analysis. I have therefore surveyed and incorporated a number of comment sections from various other articles from the *Guardian* and *Mail Online*.

### Guardian

The *Guardian* article, "*The truth about Muhammad and Aisha*" by Muslim writer Myriam Francois-Cerrah is a good starting point for this discussion since it deals with the central point of criticism directly. It opens by addressing the debates regarding Aisha's age at the time of marriage, ranging from 9 to 19, and comes to the conclusion that "it is impossible to know with any certainty how old Aisha was". She also mentions that marrying young girls was normal for people and especially rulers at the time, citing King John's marriage to 12-year old Isabella of Angoulême in the early 13th century as an example. Francois-Cerrah situates the modern criticism within wider oriental attacks against Islam and also contextualises the issue in its Arabian setting where marriages were known to cement friendships, unite tribes, resolve feuds, and show care for widows and orphans. She also challenges the idea that Aisha was a 'victim' as is constructed in anti-Muslim discourse, emphasising her 'assertive temperament' and military role. Hence, Francois-Cerrah states that the "gulf between her true legacy and her depiction in Islamophobic materials is not merely historically inaccurate, it is an insult to the memory of a pioneering woman." There were 1396 comments for the article, though I limited myself to the first 400, at which point the dominant themes were overwhelmingly clear and mostly repeated.

One of the first comments posted simply read, "*gets the pop corn this will be fun*", indicating the anticipation of the fiery yet "entertaining" discussion to follow. Comments were largely disparaging of the article and of Francois-Cerrah's arguments though fragments of praise could be found. Her and her article were often accused of "defending the indefensible" and

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<sup>119</sup> "Rejecting the Myth of Sanctioned Child Marriage in Islam" *Huffington Post*, Jan 29 2011 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-david-liepert/islamic-pedophilia\\_b\\_814332.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-david-liepert/islamic-pedophilia_b_814332.html) and "British Muslims Should Stand Up and Say It: There is Nothing Islamic About Child Marriage" *Huffington Post*, Nov 21 2013 [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/mehdi-hasan/british-muslims-child-marriage\\_b\\_4310440.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/mehdi-hasan/british-muslims-child-marriage_b_4310440.html) Both these articles argue, like Myriam Francois-Cerrah, that Aisha was not as young as Bukhari records. Though neither had comments for analysis.

were attacked from multiple angles; morally, historically, culturally and even personally. Yet, being the *Guardian*, comments were often well worded and appeared considered, despite readers appearing to see nothing good in Islam or its Prophet. On average, *Guardian* readers do indeed appear to be more intellectually composed than your average commenter on a news site. For some, however, this only makes their criticism of Islam more eloquent. The *Guardian* itself also came under some attack for publishing the piece. It was accused of “religious propaganda” and of “actively campaigning on behalf of the Islamic religion on a daily basis”. Another commenter suggested that the *Guardian* was “white-washing pedophilia” by publishing such an article. Many other issues were also discussed or mentioned outside the immediate subject matter, predominantly other morally contentious topics within Islam: segregation in mosques, concubinage, violence, rape, polygamy, the *burqa*, and homosexuality, but also wider issues such as liberalism and freedom of speech. While the *Guardian* doesn’t have a negative rating function, it does have a positive one. In general, comments which criticised the article and its arguments were the most highly rated.

#### Paedophilia. No excuse.

Unlike previous comment sections where debates were often polarised on certain issues, the vast majority of comments were criticisms and rebuttals of arguments of the article in different respects without much of a counterbalancing side. One of the main assertions was that the marriage was inherently paedophilic and totally inexcusable:

- 1) *A child cannot consent to something as serious as marriage.*
- 2) *To marry a child and consummate that marriage makes you a paedophile, Prophet or not. Nothing more to the matter.*

*Your Prophet married a child. That is not romance; that is paedophilia.*

*What a long winded story! A collection of ifs, maybes, buts and don't knows - seeking to justify what on the face of it seems like blatant pedophilia. I doubt if it would get past an Old Bailey jury.*

*Right so in the old days men could marry and rape children (yes its rape children cant consent to sex) yes the greeks did it (spartans liked young boys in particuler)the roman emperors did it,western kings did it and yes Abreham and Muhammad did it.. You can claim historical context all you like it still doesnt make it right.*

*Look, Lolita was a complex and interesting tale, indeed a masterpiece of modern literature, but the character Humbert Humbert was still a paedophile. So if we're talking about the narrative as believed by millions of Muslims, the character Muhammed was a paedophile. Paedophilia may have been considered less of a big deal back then, but it was still paedophilia!*

Such commenters clearly viewed the moral actions of the Prophet from a 21st century western perspective in the aftermath of all developments described above. The 19th century construction of paedophilia (Angelides 2009) was also being used with timeless authority, and some users were even willing to impose it onto European historical figures, at least, for the sake of consistency in their critique of Islam. For these critics, historical context did not make a difference.

### Moral example for all humanity?

Many commenters took issue with the comparison Francois-Cerrah makes to King John's marriage to a 12 year old girl, as a way to contextualise the issue. In response commenters argued:

*But we don't worship King John of England.*

*The difference is, we look back at our history with a sense of gladness that we've moved on. The Muslim tradition, as stated, is to live life as Muhammed did.*

*I get the argument that it was not uncommon for girls to be married off at young ages in times past, the difference however being that we do not worship those people as prophets and consider those actions to be worthy of praise and examples to be followed.*

*Nobody thinks that King John of England is the perfect Human, and example to all humanity, the person one should seek most to emulate. Not one, Not one hundred, certainly not 1.2 Billion.*

Regardless of the occasional commenter misidentifying Muslims as 'worshipping' the Prophet Muhammad,<sup>120</sup> the point is still clear. Namely, that the Prophet is supposed to be an example for all Muslims at all times. Thus his actions are of considerable importance and relevance to the modern world in a way that those of a medieval King of England are not. This was one of the clearest ways in which the symbolic threat was communicated (Stephan et al 2009). Muslims here are seen to be emulating a socially harmful set of values and bringing them to the western world. There were also a number of comments which alluded to the denigration of women, claiming, for example, that child marriage was "*a reflection of a patriarchal and oppressive society*". Furthermore, the 'contextualising' argument was disregarded by many readers in different ways:

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<sup>120</sup> However, the amount of people who assume the Prophet is worshipped by Muslims cannot be understated. In a *Mail Online* article titled "[Shock jock Michael Smith dumped by 2GB radio after calling prophet Mohammed 'a pedophile'](#)" the best rated comment read, "*I think anyone marrying a nine year old isn't the sort of person I would like to worship?*" and was green arrowed 398 times and red arrowed 19 times. A responder who merely pointed out that "*Muslims do not worship Mohammed*" and that only God was worshipped was green arrowed 17 times, and red arrowed 146 times.

*Mohammed is supposedly someone Muslims should look up to. If there was evidence he was actually a paedophile then presumably one would be faced with a choice, either accept that paedophilia is respectable or decide that Mohammed is not someone you should look up to. It's not complicated.*

*Once again some clever sophistry and jiggery-pokery. If you want to look at things in the context of the time (rather than base moral judgements through an early 21st lens) then the whole Discrimination/Grievance industry would collapse in the UK. You can't have it both ways!!!*

*If you want to use this 'contextualisation' argument Islam loses the primacy of its claims to total perfection and eternal absolute ethical supremacy beyond any other religion or ethical system in the modern world. Including, of course, secular liberal democracy and humanism.*

*we would consider consummating a marriage with a 9 yr old as far more than abnormal. It is arguable the worst possible offence anyone anywhere can commit. Even if it was the norm at one point, all that tells us is that those people were barbaric villains and we should take absolutely no morality lessons from them*

The spirit of some of these comments was almost in a capacity of a “check mate”. A logical intellectual inconsistency was being exposed, and, as one commenter expressed, Muslims who argue this case were trying to “*have their cake and eat it too*”. Kecia Ali (2006) similarly considers this concern of setting a standard for morality and states that Muslims who accept the marriage will have a difficult time rejecting marriage of young girls today. To claim that he was wrong to marry Aisha at this age, however, raises an acute theological predicament (Ali 2006). On the one hand, there is the desire to excuse practices of the Prophet that would now be considered immoral by western standards of today, but at the same time, there is the obvious imperative to hold the final Prophet of God as the perfect human being and example to all humanity. The charge is that Muslims will have to be selective in what they take as a timeless example of sound morality from the Prophet’s life. As another commenter put it: “*Why should some practices and pronouncements from 1300 years ago be upheld and others not? And how do you decide between them? Pick the ones you like?*”

### **It has EVERYTHING to do with Islam**

Myriam Francois-Cerrah had argued in her article that the imperatives motivating marriage of young girls today tend to be economical and political, and that despite countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran using Aisha’s age as justification for low legal marriage ages, this has more to do with their oppressive patriarchy and little to do with the Prophet Muhammad or the essential nature of Islam. This was met with fierce criticism from users explaining that it is *exactly* to do with the Prophet and the religion of Islam:

*That two Islamic countries use Muhammad's example to justify Islamic laws tells us nothing about Muhammad or Islam? Leaving aside the implicit "No True Scotsman" fallacy, how can that be true?*

*There is no essential nature of Islam. It's a cultural practice, and Saudi Arabia and Iran are the focal points of its twin branches. It says a bit of a bloody lot!*

*Yes, but then there is the fact that Islam has been the primary cultural influence in Iran and Saudi Arabia for well over a millenium, and the fact that neither country has managed to resist or roll back patriarchy in any way whatsoever. If you are correct then the best we can say for Islam is that it is totally ineffective and useless when it comes to standing up for women's rights. But the view that it actively endorses the oppression of women and reinforces that same patriarchy seems more likely to me.*

*but there is no lower age limit in Saudi Arabia even today. This delay of modernity in Mohammed's homeland is directly attributable to his example. Those who argue against creating such a limit call it "un-Islamic" and cite his example.*

*How does the low marriage age for women in SA & Iran not have anything to do with Islam when Islam is used as a justification for it? - I think your argument loses credibility here.*

The attempt to detach the Prophet's example from such practices in Muslim countries was seen as a core weakness in Francois-Cerrah's argument. In this sense, commenters were echoing very similar sentiments from John J. Pool (1892), who, as we saw, also blamed the Prophet's example for Muslim child marriages in his day. Other users extended the complaint to other aspects found in the religion used by certain Muslims to commit moral atrocities. The point is that such people are not only Muslims acting immorally, they are acting in a way explicitly exemplified by the religion. If such examples did not exist, perhaps the moral atrocities may not be so prevalent today. Brown (2014) notes that child marriage today is said to rest on economic rather than religious pressures. This can come in the form of families seeking higher birth rates in agricultural societies, and minimising children to feed by marrying off daughters (Brown 2014). A National Geographic backed documentary on child marriage in 2011 had also claimed that the practice is common in many parts of the world and is not exclusive to any religion or society.<sup>121</sup> Even if this is true, the comments may at least be picking up on the idea that the elimination of the practice is, at best, being slowed down by religious justifications which point to the Prophet's example for approval.

**It's clear - she said it herself**

Commenters were not persuaded by Francois-Cerrah's discussion of the essential ambiguity of Aisha's age at the time of marriage. The attempt to raise doubt about this was seen as apologetic and insincere<sup>122</sup>:

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<sup>121</sup> "Too Young to Wed: The Secret World of Child Brides" (2011) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYleXcpbzKY>

<sup>122</sup> Both *Huffington Post* articles on the issue written by Muslims also argued that Aisha was older. I am yet to find a paper in the mainstream media that assumes Aisha was as old as she allegedly said she was.



*Seriously; If this is just ranked after the Qur'an in terms of authenticity and correctness, it's hard to wriggle out of the girl's own testimony. If scholars want to start picking and choosing what is and isn't literally true about the Islamic canon, they're going to have to put in a lot more effort. Or just agree that it's all about as true as the Bible or any other Holy Book.*

*So, of all the things in the Qur'an we're not supposed to take literally, a girl stating her own age directly and clearly is top of the list?*

*[Quoting the article] "Critics allege that Aisha was just six years old when she was betrothed to Muhammad, himself in his 50s, and only nine when the marriage was consummated." "Critics allege" - they do not "allege" this, they state it as the teaching of Islam, which it is.*

*So Aisha herself said she was six when she married, but "other Muslims doubt [it.] ... In a society without a birth registry and where people did not celebrate birthdays, most people estimated their own age and that of others. Aisha would have been no different." So she couldn't work out, in later life, roughly how old she'd been at marriage? And no one else knew or could tell her? None of her relatives remembered her being born, say, about six years earlier? I fully accept this is about a different time and culture. But no one knew she was six? Not very convincing.*

*Oh please! 13 centuries of Islamic scholarship have accepted Aisha's young age. Attempts by some to spin her age up to make Mohammed and Islam more palatable to the West only began in the 20th century.*

For some of these commenters, raising doubt about the *hadith* in which Aisha states her age was seen as apologetically justifying the marriage to a western audience. Such attentiveness to non-Muslim scrutiny tends to be common in contemporary Muslim discussion on the issue (Ali 2006). Furthermore, users pointed out that this leads to bigger problems regarding the authenticity of *hadith* in general. As one user asked: *"if you discount one hadith, why not discount them all?"* *Hadith* sources thus become arbitrary, *"cherry picked"*, for whatever message of Islam or personality of the Prophet one wishes to portray. Kecia Ali (2006:137) raises the same point in her consideration of the issue when she claims that "[r]ejecting the view that Aishah was six and nine, respectively, at marriage and consummation implies a willingness to question the reliability of Bukhari's compilation which, under other circumstances, can subject one to attack." As another user put it: *"If someone wants to admire Muhammad, they can easily find reasons to doubt any awkward reports. If someone wants to denigrate him, they can just as easily claim the same reports are absolutely reliable. The historical Muhammad is pretty much what you want him to be."*

### [Praise, defence, hypocrisy?](#)

Amongst the many attacks against the article, there were a few expressions of praise and gratitude calling it *"fascinating"*, *"excellent"* and a *"good piece"*. Another called it a *"breath of fresh air. Balanced and articulate"*. Others came to the defense of the argument or at least re-



affirmed its contextual basis or pointed out hypocrisy in counter-accusations. I've decided quote them at length here since they were unique to the discussion and offered interesting insights into how non-Muslims might *not* be repulsed by the marriage:

*if that act was so abominable: A) Why didn't the embittered pagan enemies of Mohammed raise that as an issue amongst the other Arab tribes? They had no qualms calling him a magician and other unflattering titles, why didn't they calling him an immoral groom if it weren't for the fact they saw no problem with it or make an issue out of it amongst the other arabs whom Mohammed was trying to win over? B) In the middle east then and in the period earlier marriage at 9 was considered acceptable, read the Talmud where it mentions the permissibility of a 9 year old female being married off.*

*I only wish as much attention was put on the age difference of the Virgin Mary & her marriage to Joseph. Or the behaviour of Socrates & co, the founders of Western philosophy and their love of young boys. This may go along way to dealing with the paranoid thinking of Muslims thinking they constantly being attack, creating a "them & us" mentality.*

*Fact is, the public find it tastier to digest negative and polemical ideas about the Prophet Muhammad than anything positive. In fact the press never focuses on anything positive about the historical legacy of Islam. It is unfortunately a task solely carried by the Muslim population. It is pointed out in this article, although not in these words, that nomadic cultures have a completely different attitude to marriage anyway. I think if anyone believes his wife was six years old has issues as she is a historical figure whose ideas are crucial for the formation of Islamic belief. This perverse interest in her age is especially ironic seeing as we have the highest rate of teenage pregnancies in UK which has more to do with the moral deficit than a misnomer of Islamic history. I don't see teenage Muslim girls in with prams every day. Do you?*

*This was all a long time ago.*

*Personally it is more to do with the fact that it was in the 6th century..In a harsh environment, I suspect that Aisha had a much better life than she might have hoped for being married to Mohammed.As far as I have read ( which is little) he tended to look after women , and marry them so as to be able to do this. Yes, a sexual relationship, but also protective and with good intent. Just as Britain in the 6th century, or later - as a woman, there were many dubious fates. Being one of a few wives, of a man who was, essentially good, as well as educated, was certainly one of the better ones, however young you were when you were married. How can anyone judge it ?*

*It seems totally inappropriate and unenlightened to speak of Muhammad and his wife in the same context of "paediophilia", a crime encompassing the abuse of children and young women, by men, rather than an issue about the historical and cultural norms and customs governing marriages in different societies. The legitimacy of including and comparing the concept and practice of "paediophilia" in any discourse about the sociology of marital customs in any society, is fraught with issues of invalidity, since the former is characterised as a crime committed by individuals, whereas the latter is legitimized on the basis of custom, culture and tradition; according to norms of the particular society and the level of their advancement.*

*for England, there are records of child divorce which indicate that child marriage was more widespread than dynastic relations between aristocrats. There are examples of baby marriage, annulled by the church which set the age of seven as an age of consent. Bishop Hugh of Lincoln intervened in the case of a much-married girl, Grace of Sabely, because she had first been married at the age of four. These child and infant marriages continued at least into the 17th Century.*

A number of points were raised here. The main issue was affirming the historical and cultural context of the marriage which should absolve it from being blameworthy, or at least ward off modern judgement, particularly the charge of paedophilia. That the Prophet was not condemned by his harshest critics is a point that has precedent in modern orientalist work on Islam. Christian scholar, W. Montgomery Watt (1961: 229), had asked, for example, "[h]ow are we to judge

Muhammad? By the standards of his own time and country? Or by those of the most enlightened opinion in the West today? When the sources are closely scrutinized, it is clear that those of Muhammad's actions which are disapproved by the modern West were not the object of the moral criticism of his contemporaries... His contemporaries did not find him morally defective in any way." Hypocrisy was alluded to in a number of ways. One commenter had mentioned the biased lack of focus in the West on greatly influential historical figures of western civilisation and their relations with those now considered underage. Another makes a similar claim regarding English history and divorce records, challenging the double standard, but also making the case that such marriages were not limited to just the aristocratic class. Finally, another commenter points to the 'moral deficit' of the UK having the highest rate of teen pregnancy as an ironic attribute of the attack against the Prophet from the British public. These counter-criticisms are all encapsulated by van Dijk's (1998) ideological square. Examples of historical figures of the western tradition whose teachings are still relevant today are typically not vilified for their sexual or moral practices which do not meet a 21st century moral standard. Instead, they are often held in positive light. Yet, as one commenter also suggests, the press tends not to focus on anything positive about the historical legacy of Islam and instead, adopts a "*perverse interest*" into aspects of the faith that represent it in a negative light. If van Dijk's ideological square was not a frame through which such a discussion was taking place, the content of the comments in this particular section would perhaps have more of a monopoly over the whole discussion. Polarisation of cultures would not be constructed to the same extent (given the acknowledgment of historical similarities), and an "us and them" representation would likely be significantly reduced.

### The horribly immoral Prophet

Many commenters seemed to understand the Prophet's marriage to Aisha in context of an already very negative impression of who he was:

*Whatever Mo PBH was up to with this young piece of skirt, he was clearly a manipulative, violent and unpleasant individual, even by the standards of his time (that's why he rose to the top)*

*I wonder what it's like to become 'war booty' and then be married off to the warlord who killed your husband (and probably your father and brothers) rather than live the rest of your life as a slave. I'm sure it's very romantic.*

*the main problem with making a criticism that mohammad did not marry aisha at age 6 (and had sex with her at age 9), is that it undermines the hadiths. but criticism of Mohammad is not just his pedophilia. there is many other countless hadiths where violence, plunder, rape and murder is very well described.*

*So his child-bride became a warlord too? That's supposed to make non-Muslims feel better? It's time to set Mohammed aside as a model for ethical behaviour today. And to stop browbeating non-Muslims into trying to like him.*

A number of comments referred to the Prophet as a 'warlord' which, generally, and from looking at such comments, seems to conjure up images of a savage, barbaric despot, who primarily uses violence and rape to consolidate his power. Such an image complies with the monstrous image of the paedophile constructed in the late 20th century (Hocquenghem 1978). The characterisation, of course, denies any chance of perceiving the marriage positively, despite hadith sources and biographical sources indicating so (Spellberg 1994).

### Islam/Religion backward

As with nearly all articles on Islam - especially in the *Guardian* - the sentiment that Islam and religion are backward and unenlightened (Said 1995) was recurring:

*I've got no time for religion. I've got even less time for singling out particular religions and their followers. Religion is bonkers, Islam is bonkers, Christianity is bonkers - it's all bonkers. ....and isn't there a fair amount of queer bashing, sexist shit and sister shagging in the bible too.....? Let's face it - many of the "Mo was a paedo" brigade just don't fucking like "p\*\*\*s"! (their word not mine, hence the "....." and the \*\*\* - just to be clear!)*

*Islam might, might, have been enlightened and progressive 13 Centuries ago, it isn't now, there is nothing it has to offer me as a modern educated person living in the 21st century. Nothing at all.*

*If you ever read these pages you would find a distaste for all the Desert religions. The difference is that here in the West we have got rid of theocracies, most people do not care what the Bible or Talmud says, it might inform what some people say or think but it isn't part of our laws or morality. Christianity in the UK is mostly relegated to weddings and funerals, it took a long time and much blood was spilled but the C of E is basically irrelevant today.*

*Islam ( a man made ideology btw ) offers nothing but shackles to humanity same like all other religions.*

*Islam is not a Liberal Ideology but an entire way of life, complete with its own ethical, moral and legal codes. It is a way of life that had its origins and was structured around the lives of desert dwellers 1200 years ago. It has no relevance in the modern world. It is fundamentally hostile to all the ethical and moral values that I hold, so of course I reject it.*

*The Arabs were leading the world in science and technology - then the conservatives 'outvoted' those more open to change and adapt. That's what kept the whole of Islam in a backward state while the rest of the world move on. It's to the rest of Europe's great shame that the Ottoman's weren't booted out of the Balkans earlier: instead, a large chunk of Europe was kept under the same cloud of ignorance for some 400 years. Islam tied itself to the first 3 generations of its religion, thereby chaining itself to a medieval corpse.*

The main difference with such comments compared to parallel ones from say, *Mail Online* readers, is that *Guardian* users will often support their claim that Islam is a backward religion with their understanding of history, religion, and culture. As a result, such opinions appear not to be coming from a place of ignorance. These were typically some of the most popular

(highly rated) comments, indicating a strong anti-religion and anti-Islamic stance amongst *Guardian* readers.

### Why does it matter?

A number of comments, could not see the sense in why the issue was being discussed or why it was relevant today. Yet these comments were a tiny minority, even less than the amount of users who defended or contextualised the marriage in some way.

*Dear Madame, When will people (Muslims are people first) stop worrying about what did or did not happen 1400 years ago and what it means? When will they just get on with their lives? For the rest of us, we don't care.*

*We don't care. We don't care. We have more important things to worry about - jobs, housing, health, etc. Yours respectfully.*

*If Mohamed existed or not, and if he did preferred peas to broccoli it surely should be irrelevant and not be worth people losing their calm over.*

*Of course the obvious response is why should we care what happened to the wife of a Middle Eastern warlord 1300 years ago. We don't except as a matter of curiosity care what age John's wife was and accept that no-one needs to live according to 7th Century morality. The important thing is not to condone paedophilia today and not to define maturity as the onset of menstruation.*

*What does it matter if a made up character has sex with another made up character at the age of 6, 9 or 19? In the end it is still a work of fiction.*

These comments were interesting because, again, they showed ways in which non-Muslims might *not* be repulsed and moved by the Prophet's marriage to Aisha. Such commenters seemed somewhat detached from anti-Muslim sentiment, perceiving the issue as historically distant and irrelevant. The important point, as one highlights, is not to condone such actions today. There was also a sentiment that the Prophet Muhammad may not have even existed, which made the discussion of precise age details even more unnecessary. For others, however, the issue appears to be incredibly relevant, coming back to the symbolic and realistic threats manifested in the challenging of cherished western values and the abuse of underaged girls.

### Mail Online I

Mail Online article, "[\*British executive facing jail in Dubai after calling Prophet Mohammad a 'complete paedophile' in text message to Muslim colleague\*](#)", reports a dispute between a British Muslim, Khalid Shafique, and British non-Muslim Indian, Deep Marwaha who are colleagues at

a UK-based firm living in Dubai. On a business trip to Saudi Arabia, Shafique had gone to make the minor pilgrimage (*umrah*) after completing business meetings for the day. Marwaha was allegedly angry at this and claimed that the religious trip was not part of company policy, at which Shafique insisted that he had gone in his free time. Shafique soon resigned and 2 days later apparently received a number of abusive text messages from Marwaha, including: “*Fuck you, fuck your Islam and fuck your prophet. Your Prophet Mohammad is a complete paedophile. Now show what you can do. I know lots of sheikhs.*” Shafique complained to authorities and a court case commenced. In his defence, Marwaha claimed that he was asleep when the text was delivered and suggested that someone else had sent the messages on his phone using a special programme. The article reports that he faces up to three years in jail and deportation if convicted. There were only 22 comments for the article, though hundreds appeared to have rated the comments giving an indication of where general sentiments lie.

This piece was useful because it shows how a segment of the British public might respond to someone making an actual charge of paedophilia against the Prophet of Islam. Furthermore, other aspects of the story impose certain variables unique to its own case, which can also offer interesting insights.<sup>123</sup> For example, the insult occurs in a mundane, everyday context; not academic or part of a journalistic discussion like that of the previous *Guardian* article, nor political like the statement of Dutch MP, Geert Wilders. This situates the offence much closer to the reality of readers, bringing about more relatable sentiments. Also, the insult occurs as part of an already strongly abusive text, which appears inexcusable given the context and relationship between the individuals. Readers are thus given more reason to defend the case of the Muslim employee whose person, religion and Prophet were obscenely attacked. Finally, the fact that the non-Muslim is of Indian origin, not white, might give reason to reduce the tendency for the average *Mail Online* reader to identify with him.

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<sup>123</sup> The *Mail Online* also highlighted Marwaha’s “high-flying” social status as a previous “£15,000-a-year Latymer Upper School” attendee, now involved in multi-billion dollar Saudi government infrastructure plans for Mecca. It was clear that the *Mail Online* was trying to emphasise his social status, despite it seeming somewhat out of place (they even showed a picture of Latymer school). The *Daily Mail* and the *Mail Online* are known to point out the wealth of high profile individuals as a marker of privilege to their generally lower earning readership, but it was not clear what effect this had on readers in this instance. To hazard a guess, it may be the case that the article intended to represent Marwaha as being the bad guy, though this was not adopted in the general sentiment of readers.

## Age disparity

The majority of commenters and comment-raters seemed not to sympathise with the Muslim employee, Shafique. Users were quick to affirm that the marital age disparity between the Prophet and Aisha, as if to imply: 'it's true though':

*A pedophile is any adult who engage in sexual activities with a minor.*

*How very typical - don't speak out against Islam or else. It is a fact the prophet married Alisha when she was 8 years old.*

*In his fifties, Muhammad married a Aisha, a child of six years old, and had sex with her when she was 9 years old. Collections of hadiths have establish the authenticity of this oral tradition.*

*Didn't he marry a seven year old?*

*Mohammed married Aisha when she was 6 years old and consummated the "marriage" when she was 9. He was 53 at the time.*

*Mo married Aisha at 8 but consummated at 13.*

All comments received strong positive ratings with the exception of the last. The latter received mostly negative ratings, most likely, it seems, due to readers understanding that the stated ages of marriage and consummation were incorrect. This is further supported by another comment which sought to correct the apparent age error, quoting the said comment by user 'dogboy' and claiming: "*Wrong Dogboy, in Aisha's own testimony, the consummation took place when she was 9 years of age.*" This comment was 3rd best rated with 183 green arrows and 33 red arrows. The sentiment towards dogboy's comment, therefore, was possibly something close to: 'no, it's even *worse* than that', hence being the only negatively rated comment in this selection. What this also implies is that many *Mail Online* readers are aware of the stated age of Aisha at the time of her marriage according to Islamic sources, suggesting that "facts" of anti-Muslim rhetoric are common knowledge.<sup>124</sup>

## Freedom of speech - us and them

Pointing out Aisha's young age was one way in which commenters objected to the possible sentencing of the British executive, Marwaha. Other commenters expressed displeasure at the fact that someone was facing a jail sentence for simply speaking out against Islam. The first

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<sup>124</sup> This was also echoed in the previous *Guardian* article. An otherwise disparaging comment towards Francois-Cerrah read, "Most educated people, and the majority of posters here usually seem very well educated indeed, are familiar with Mohammed's life story, the distinction between the Q'ran and the Hadith, and the historical records of his relationships."

comment here was the most positively rated of all comments with 231 green arrows and 53 red arrows. The second was fourth best rated with 181 green arrows and 35 red:

*Here we go again, Its alright for them to insult us openly....But they dont like it when they get a bit of their own medicine....And it happens in the Western world all the time...*

*This is where we are headed, at one time we could say what we liked but now you have to watch every word especially if it's anything to do with Islam.*

Thus commenters had two main objections to the prosecution: that the charge of paedophilia is technically true, and that this is a denial of freedom of speech. The “we/they”, “us/them” rhetoric is incredibly clear in these comments and is suggestive of a wider population of readers sharing such a perspective seeing as they were of the most popular. It is also interesting that such a perspective seemed prevalent despite the non-Muslim being named Deep Marwaha, and being of Indian origin.<sup>125</sup> One would imagine that if he was white with an English name, there would perhaps be a stronger presence of such comments. Still, the fact that a man of Indian origin with a ‘foreign’ name is immediately accepted on the side of “us” and “we”, is indicative of how demarcating the anti-Muslim sentiment can be in its construction of the Muslim as the exclusive other. In another *Mail Online* article titled, [\*“Shock jock Michael Smith dumped by 2GB radio after calling prophet Mohammed 'a pedophile'”\*](#), popular comments similarly emphasised the lack of freedom of speech but also singled out a perceived double standard: *“If he had said the same things about say Jesus or Moses there probably wouldn't be an issue”*. The comment was green arrowed 257 times and red arrowed 26 times. In this case, the offender in question was indeed white with an English name, but with all other circumstantial variables factored in, it is difficult to assess whether or not commenters were more on his side than the case with Marwaha.

### Attacking someone's religion is wrong

The lack of sympathy felt for the Muslim employee was further affirmed by the negative ratings of only two comments which took the side of the Muslim:

*hope he gets locked up. u shldnt abuse others religion, beleifs or ethnicity*

*Serves him right you cannot go and say stuff about people's religion like that*

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<sup>125</sup> And possibly in spite of being a “high-flying” executive.

The first of these was the number one worst rated comment of the 22 that were posted, receiving 227 red arrows and 69 green. The second received 144 red and 40 green arrows, demonstrating that over two thirds of raters generally disagreed with such statements. These comments appeared to take into account the entirety of the text message that was quoted in the article, as opposed just the charge of paedophilia which was mentioned in the title. Similarly, in the article addressing Michel Smith, one of the worst rated comments critiqued Smith with the words, “*What a moron. On so many levels*”, and was green arrowed 25 times, but red arrowed 264 times. This suggests that general readers feel that people have a right to call the Prophet a paedophile, and will often disagree with someone who condemns such insults.

### **Mail Online II**

*Mail Online* article titled, “[\*Muslim abuser who 'didn't know' that sex with a girl of 13 was illegal is spared jail\*](#)” reports a young Muslim, 18 years of age, who allegedly groomed a thirteen year old girl on Facebook to have sex with her. When the incident was reported, the boy had said in his defence that he didn’t know it was illegal to have sex with a 13 year old and claimed that the Islamic school which he had attended taught students that “women are no more worthy than a lollipop that has been dropped on the ground.” The judge was lenient and excused the boy for being sexually naive and sheltered from the reality of British law due to his upbringing and Islamic schooling. As a result, the boy avoided the expected 4-7 year prison sentence, instead only having to serve 9 months in youth custody. This story is interesting because it concerns a Muslim who actually had sex with an underage girl. As we saw earlier, a number of anti-Muslim websites make a link between such practices and the actual religion of Islam. Thus, it would be interesting to see if the average *Mail Online* reader would also make such a link, and in what way. The article yielded 1005 comments.

Many of the comments posted expressed outrage at the judge's decision, often demanding for him to be sacked. The boy was frequently berated by users as scum, a liar, and a paedophile who should be jailed. Commenters insisted that ignorance should never be an excuse for breaking the law, and complained about how the boy was excused. There was a strong appeal for the Muslim school which allegedly taught such disparaging notions regarding women to be shut down and/or investigated. This led to others simply claiming that faith schools should



not be allowed in the UK. While the vast majority of comments were not directly related to impressions of Islam, a number of interesting points can be inferred from those that were.

### [This is forbidden in Islam](#)

Blaming Islam for encouraging this type of behaviour was surprisingly absent from user comments. Instead, users (including some self-identified Muslims), were quick to rebut the Muslim boy's defence by emphasising that he should have known sex outside of marriage was forbidden.

*Fornication in Islam is forbidden. Something tells me someone is telling porkys.*

*except that his Muslim upbringing should have taught you the same as my Muslim upbringing: no sex outside wedlock. This is yet another stupid idiot tarnishing the image of Islam. There is no excuse for what he did, full stop!*

*Under Sharia Law he should not be having sex with anyone until married. Punishment- stoning.*

*He blames it on religion - but the muslim laws say that sex is haram outside of wedlock. Don't blame religion blame yourself. Another story that tarnishes the name of islam*

*Under Sharia Law, his punishment for having sex outside wedlock is to be stoned to death. He's a disgrace to Islam. And so are his Teachers. That's coming from a Muslim.*

All such comments were very positively rated, whether from a Muslim commenter or not. It is almost as if the division between Muslims and non-Muslims vanished in the face of a more pressing issue. The last comment here, for example, received 355 green arrows and only 12 red arrows. Commenters used their knowledge of Islam to denounce the Muslim boy's actions and appeared to support Muslims who were highlighting this, perhaps as a means of doubly legitimising the condemnation within its own Muslim ethical context. The occasional commenter went further to claim that 'he should be stoned', drawing on their perceptions of Islamic law. Such comments were also supported. The first comment about stoning here, for example, was 7th best rated of 1005, with 7527 green arrows and only 132 red arrows. One commenter even expressed: *"This guy is a shame to muslim people, man, and human! Punishment= chop it off! That is what would happen to him in a muslim courtroom!"* Interestingly, negative stereotypes in this context were not used in response to perceived

threat from an outgroup (Stephan et al 2009), but used almost favourably to condemn an action that was seen to be wrong beyond ingroup-outgroup dynamics.<sup>126</sup>

### Hiding behind religion

Reaffirming the lack of blame towards Islam was another popular comment. Namely, the claim that the Muslim was hiding behind religion. The first comment here was the second highest rated of 1005, with 9730 green arrows and 184 red arrows.

*Typical trying to hide behind religion!*

*I hate it when people hide behind religion. He is sick in the head. End of*

*What a plunker.. Dont use religon as an xcuse of your dispicable behaviour.. Islam does not permit sex before marriage let alone to a vunerable little girl.*

*Criminals must stop using Islam as an excuse for criminal acts.*

For these commenters and the thousands that appeared to agree, religion was not to blame. The Muslim boy was perceived to be cowardly, using his faith and religious schooling to explain his acts. The fact that users knew that his religion also condemns his actions only made the young Muslim seem more personally blameworthy.

### Islam respects women

Contrary to the boy's actions and to what the school allegedly taught, some comments emphasised the idea that Islam actually respects women. Unexpectedly, these comments were also positively rated. The first comments here was the 8th best rated comment, with 6205 green arrows and 380 red arrows. I have included the ratings for all comments on this occasion to show how the *Mail Online* readership reacted to such a sentiment:

*It's not forbidden outside religion but outside wedlock, it is referred to as fornication. This has nothing to do with his religion, that's just an excuse. And that must be some twisted 'Madrassa' he went to, as Islam teaches that women are a blessing. They open the door of heaven for their fathers when they are daughters, they complete half a man's religion when they marry him and heaven lies under their feet when they are mothers. This is the true Islam that am interpreting, not the made up one which the likes of him follow. His*

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<sup>126</sup> At the same time, the worst rated comments were typically those that questioned why the article needed to state his religion, showing that people strongly thought that it was justified in doing so. This could be for a number of reasons, not least of which is that the boy allegedly learnt his views from a *Muslim* faith school. Also, the number one rated comment by quite a significant number did indeed assume ingroup/outgroup dynamics: "Why is it legal to send a child to a school where they get brought up not to respect the laws and customs of this country? Ofsted come down like a tonne of bricks on any school that doesn't promote respect for minorities. What about respect for the majority?" This comment received 12286 green arrows and 294 red arrows.

*religion is no excuse, what he lacked was morality. If he had morals and the 'madrassa' taught him what he claimed he would have realised it was wrong. I highly doubt to take the word of this idiot and believe this is what the madrassa taught him. Religion isn't the problem, nor is the madrassa, what is the problem is him and his immoral upbringing! 6205+ 380-*

*Just another example of someone playing the system by playing dumb and unfortunately succeeding. Muslims are not allowed to have sex outside of marriage and actually for those in the know - there are many rulings in Islam that protect woman and show how important it is to respect woman. Of course he would have know what he was doing was illegal. 167+ 7-*

*ugh as a Muslim male i am DISGUSTED. I was raised to treat women with utmost respect. The fact that he and his lawyer are blaming this on islam is pathetic. he's a vile human being and should be locked up for life. how can anyone believe 'women are no more worthy than a lollipop that has been dropped on the ground'. werent you brought into this world by a woman?!?!?! 38+ 3-*

*oh my that is disgusting no religion tells anyone such a thing i am a muslim an i have never been taght such a thing it is really sad to know people think like this,. This boy should be punished and where he has been taught should be closed. NO RELIGION SAYS WOMEN ARE WORTHLESS THEY TELL US TO RESPECT THEM. 161+ 11-*

This was a surprising discovery in the data. With the consistent finding that Muslim women are perceived as oppressed in Islam in previous chapters, it was expected that such comments would not be positively rated. Indeed, similar sentiments posted in previous articles regarding the face-veil or polygamy were not received so favourably. The discrepancy, however, is easily explainable. In this context, the appeal to Islam respecting women serves a purpose of interest: to condemn the behaviour that has already aroused the strong disapproval of *Mail Online* readers. In previous articles, appeals to Islam treating women well were seen as a defence of a threatening cultural practice. If the view on Muslim women can be reinterpreted in such a way, it supports the idea that the perception that Islam is oppressive towards women has quite an arbitrary quality attached to it. Indeed, this was also demonstrated in an earlier chapter when a white non-Muslim woman's engagement with women in *niqab* dissolved her negative perceptions. Of course, the other explanation is that raters were actually reacting to the general condemnatory spirit of such comments. In any case, the fact that highlighting Islam's respect for women did not deter general support, still suggests that readers are not as statically opposed to such an idea as one might expect.

## Conclusion

There are a number of conclusions to be drawn from this analysis. The first concerns the overview of how the criticism of paedophilia has progressed over time. The charge of paedophilia or attacking the Prophet's marriage to Aisha appears to have undergone an extreme linear change in history. In the time of the Prophet and throughout the medieval

period, it was non-existent, despite the harshest insults being levelled against him by his non-Muslim contemporaries and later western antagonists. Later, in the Victorian period, writers would mention the marriage but mostly with a sympathetic understanding, with mild exceptions. However, it was not until the late 20th century with the construction of the villainous paedophile, along with other social and legal shifts that criticisms ensued more vehemently.

Since 9/11 in particular, the charge of paedophilia has risen to being one of the most notorious remarks made about the Prophet, but at the same time, is felt to be justified in the modern context. As seen above, both *Guardian* readers and *Mail Online* readers feel that the charge of paedophilia is true and morally deplorable with few exceptions. Historical and cultural context was shown to be ineffective as an explanation for many users who had a variety of responses to rebut such arguments, the most salient of which was highlighting the idea that the Prophet is supposedly a moral example for all time. The critique is also entrenched in other anti-Muslims framework narratives, such as a general dislike for the Prophet, presenting religion and Islam as backward (Said 1995), and as oppressive towards women (Ahmed 1992). Albeit, the latter was less explicitly pronounced than that associated with issues of veiling and polygamy. Also evident was the rhetoric of 'us vs them', particularly in the context of non-Muslims making the accusation of paedophilia, being penalised, and users' feelings that such penalisation is unjust. This was represented by both the positive ratings on comments which indicated that the insult is technically true, and from the negative ratings on those who felt it wrong to make such attacks. In this context, freedom of speech was used to consolidate the position. Users from the *Guardian* and *Mail Online* were also very 'prepared' regarding the charge of paedophilia. *Guardian* readers were ready with rebuttals from multiple angles, while *Mail Online* readers also demonstrated an awareness of *hadith* evidence regarding the marriage. This demonstrates the extent to which the criticism is established in anti-Muslim discourse as common knowledge.

Unlike the issue of veiling, it is unlikely that any contact with Muslims under any set of conditions would help ease negative perceptions in this regard (Allport 1954). This is largely because the criticism is not based solely on a symbolic threat, but on a realistic threat which actually harms children in various parts of the world including the UK. There is a parallel to be made here with impressions on Muslim polygamy, which also saw a rejection of cultural and

historical context under the charge of female oppression (for many *Guardian* readers at least), though not to the same extent. It would also be near impossible to find an author - let alone a non-Muslim one - to defend child marriage in a mainstream British paper as we saw with polygamy in the last chapter. This has much to do with the value we now place on consent in the modern western world, and the innocent and vulnerable construction of childhood which dominates modern society. It will be interesting to see how the discourse changes over the next number of decades. More understanding and sympathetic attitudes towards paedophilia may eventually render the term far less derogatory (like the case with homosexuality), and thus cause it to lose much of its offensive power against the Prophet. Though issues of consent will undoubtedly stunt this possibility.

Ultimately, the modern criticism detaches the marriage from both its social and historical context, from the moral ethos of Islam, as well as from the biographies of the married pair, details of which may challenge the negative assumptions of critics. This blinkered focus on the issue fuels the sense of its absurdity and will ensure its deplorability in years to come.

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

As has hopefully been demonstrated in the preceding chapters, anti-Muslim sentiment is far from monolithic and static. Although the tone and 'spirit' through which such perspectives are conveyed seldom vary in their negativity, the discourse is filled with shifts, sprouts, and turns (sometimes self-contradicting) which permeate throughout the centuries in which the discourses have existed. I have tried to explain the nature of these changes in terms of their social constructions, tracing their appearances and formulations within their given historical and sociological contexts, but also identifying key actors in the modern period who have helped shape such discourses into what they are today. The result shows, that like ideas regarding identity being contingent and relational (Sahlins 1989, Colley 1992), moral sentiments are also contingent and relational against perceptions of the other and of the self.

Taking a more discrete, closely focused, and historical view on certain criticisms against Islam reveals much about how such perceptions arrive into popular discourse: What was said, and by whom? What laws were changed? What labels were constructed and how were they used? What shifts in social consciousness? All these questions, as has hopefully been demonstrated, are essential to understanding the discourses as they present themselves today. Such historical details also serve to debunk media narratives which tend to bound and simplify issues for common consumption.

The media can indeed say much about the opinions of wider society (Knott 2013). This investigation has demonstrated that comments do largely reflect the narratives which have dominated the representation of Islam in mainstream media over previous decades (Poole 2002, Richardson 2004, Baker et al 2013). This was by no means an obvious finding. It could have easily been assumed that the institutional-independence of commenters could have opened a more critical view of media narratives, but overwhelmingly, this was not the case. Instead, negative media content met with high volumes of negative comments (indicating a large audience) appear to mutually perpetuate one another. Poole's central defining themes regarding media coverage of Muslims in the 90s are still applicable. Particularly, that Muslims are a threat to British 'mainstream' values; that there are inherent cultural differences between Muslims and the host community which create tensions; and that Muslims are increasingly making their presence felt in the public sphere (Poole 2002). There are still

notable differences, however, which render the subject of researching online comments a valuable and unique endeavour and not merely a straight reflection of what has already been established. Much of this rests on the freedom given to online users to post what they want, outside of establishment norms and expectations. This opens up new perspectives and insights on both positive and negative extremes. On the one hand, there is a presence of amplified sense of anti-Muslim hate and potentially offensive remarks which are no longer overtly typical to mainstream articles. It also reveals the extent to which negative cognitive frames of understanding are embedded in the minds of the British public. On the other hand, online comments do still give the opportunity for users and blog posters to challenge mainstream trends (van Dijk 1991), in a way not typical to traditional newspaper articles. This was perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the lengthy comment from the user who shared her positive experience of working with women in *niqab*. Such anecdotal insight would be rare, if not impossible, to find in traditional mainstream news articles. Despite the consistent minority presence of such dissenting voices throughout the preceding chapters, they still offer a positive shift from the top-down, imposing, racist or anti-Muslim establishment rhetoric (van Dijk 1991). It has also been very interesting to see how the way in which an issue is addressed, or by whom, can affect the nature of discussion. The prose of a popular, comic writer, on an otherwise serious and sensitive topic can diffuse much anxiety and tension surrounding an issue, while also informing readers of a more positive perspective. Also significant has been the way commenters engage with one another, or share their experiences which may also challenge anti-Muslim assumptions of the status-quo. Muslims themselves are able to use comment sections to correct misconceptions or side with the general condemnation of other 'bad' Muslims who notoriously make headlines. This serves to make other Muslims more relatable, as was seen in a number of comments on the *Mail Online*. Still, these perspectives have yet to have substantial influence on presiding views.

The plausibility of the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954) appeared to correlate with whether or not the contentious issue in question posed only a symbolic or both a symbolic and realistic threat (Stephan et al 2009). In only the example of the face-veil, which was purely symbolic, did we see evidence of prejudices being reversed upon substantial contact. For the subject matter of other chapters, realistic threats in the form of economic, emotional, and physical harm largely denied the possibility of perception change. This was ironic in a way because the

veil is the most commonly appearing and most demonised news theme of all anti-Muslim topics addressed in the media.

A common theme throughout almost all comment sections was the identification of Islam and religion as backward. This finding, which comes as no surprise, firmly attaches such reservations about Islam to its oriental and colonial legacy (Said 1995). The theme of oppression towards women was also frequent. However, this was debated in different ways, with each of the three issues dealing with women becoming less and less justifiable. With the veil, for instance, we saw that despite many commenters insisting that veiling equals subordination and oppression, a large liberal voice also insisted that a woman should be able to wear what she wants. On a rare occasion, then, a feminist sentiment had challenged the anti-Islamic standard. Muslims themselves typically ascribe empowering notions to the veil, which offers further justification. With polygamy, on the other hand, feminists tended to critique the practice, while some liberal men had defended it in principle within the framework of consenting adults. This was due to the realistic threat of polygamy which, objectors argued, manifested in the misery and actual harm of women. Even less defensible was the Prophet's marriage to Aisha which, at best, received an acknowledgment of historical contextualisation, though no single commenter expressed that such a practice was defensible today. Thus Islamic practices deemed to be negative towards women appeared to have different degrees of condemnation from the public. It is interesting to compare such criticisms with the historical European view of the same issue. The Prophet's marriage to Aisha in the medieval period, for example, would have likely been the least cause of complaint of the four.

The moral distinctions between chapters also exposed discrepancies in western thinking regarding relationship formations. For example, there is an emphasis on consent being the factor that denies child marriage and condones homosexual relationships, while at the same time, is less relevant when considering Muslim polygamy. Such discrepancies, aside from being influenced by other factors, should not necessarily be seen as manifestations of hypocrisy. Rather, they appear to be part of ongoing changes within western liberal thought and practice. The United Kingdom and the western world in general is still, in some respects, juggling a hybrid of the traditional Christian values with secular liberalism, which is gaining more social and cultural ground. As various news articles have argued, the legalisation of polygamy (for both sexes) is a very logical follow on to legalising gay marriage on the basis of



consenting adults. However, it is partially a historical attachment to Christian monogamy in the liberal schema of the establishment, which has rendered civil marriage legal, and polygamy not. But this is not expected to remain as such. We are in a kind of an ongoing values-transition which will continue indefinitely. As I have argued previously, these shifts will undoubtedly continue to affect how Islam is criticised.

Sexual identity, labels, and category constructions were also seen to play a big hand in the shifting of anti-Muslim sentiment, both in the past and the present. This is perhaps the most volatile dimension of the anti-Muslim discourse not only because it is characterized by sensitive political correctness and inflammatory remarks, but also in the fact that it is one of the most extreme and rapidly shifting areas. The complete reversal in critiquing Islam for homosexuality and the exponential rise in claiming the Prophet to be a paedophile in modernity are two of the most recent and dramatic changes within the discourse. These examples suggest an instability within the nature of the discourse and most clearly undermine its moral authority and consistency.

It was also demonstrated that the hate and criticism levelled against Islam was not universal. That is, such moral examples and values did not necessarily offend all non-Muslims. In every chapter, there were a minority of commenters who would defend the issue at hand, or at least show some appreciation of what was being conveyed. This occurred in David Mitchell's article on the *burqa*, Mehdi Hasan's article on homosexuality, Brian Whitaker's article on polygamy, and in Myriam Francois-Cerrah's article on the Prophet's marriage to Aisha. While this does not seem like a very important point considering numbers were almost always a consistent minority, examples of non-Muslims not feeling hate or negativity towards such details of Islam may provide insight into how negative attitudes might be reduced. At the same time, the current study has also shown that increased knowledge of Islam does not necessarily reduce prejudice. While better knowledge and understanding might succeed in shifting the mental states of some, this might also be heavily bound to people having an *a priori* "hate" or prejudice towards Islam in the first place. Indeed, many cases in the *Guardian* showed that people's increased knowledge of Islam only fuelled their anti-Muslim sentiment.

Exclusive focus on a particular contention online has also offered insights into details of debates and anxieties which may otherwise be overlooked. This is largely due to the plethora

of perspectives and discussions that are permitted to ensue on a medium such as user-comment posts. Sidelined opinions from the public can easily be missed in traditional mainstream media and even radio/televised broadcasts. A key example from this research has been the voice of a Muslim who experiences same-sex attraction, but chooses to control their desires for religious reasons. This reflects a position in the Muslim community which is almost invisible behind a public dispute which is dominated by anti-gay Muslims on one side, and pro-gay liberals (Muslim or not) on the other. In this sense, online comments from hundreds of users brings to the surface perspectives which one may not find in a focus group or interview, especially if those research tools are bound by pre-perceived parameters of discussion, which is too often the case. Still, such unbound opinions and perspectives within user comments is not always the case. As we saw with the veil chapter, for example, there was no acknowledgement of the metaphysical virtues of covering, which is core to Islamic belief. Thus, a Muslim practice was entirely removed from its appropriate context and thrust into a secular debate around women's rights. This was in spite of literally thousands of comments surveyed on the issue.

It is hoped that the current study, which has focused on specific moral contentions, will encourage further examination of anti-Muslim discourses not necessarily centred on dominant themes of terror/jihad and the perceived violence of the religion. Further work in other countries in which Muslims are a minority population would be interesting to compare. It is predicted that other communities will have their own moral grievances or angles within them. It would also be interesting to see how specific grievances are constructed in those relevant communities and how the media presents them. In ten or fifty years time, future studies in the UK examining the same issues raised here might also demonstrate how narratives continue to change.

It is easy to forget the constantly shifting nature of anti-Islamic rhetoric, since our engagement with the media will see the same issues being raised over and over again in almost a static manner. Given the changes that have actually taken place, however, the most appropriate imperative becomes less to do with "how Islamophobia can be stopped" and more to do with observing how and why various contentions take their course.

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